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BIANCA'S DAUGHTER

A NOVEL

BY
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"BUCHANAN'S WIFE"
"JASON" ETC.



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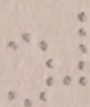
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I

THE GIRL WHO WANTED TO LIVE

THE two Blakes, father and son, shared—as they shared most of their likes and dislikes—a profound distaste for balls, and never went to them when the obligation could possibly be avoided. In consequence it happened that an hour after their arrival at Mrs. Cartwright's dance—that is to say, somewhat after one o'clock—they met in a doorway of the ball-room, and each, encountering the hunted, furtive look in the other's eyes, began to laugh.

“I take it from your air of distress,” said Creighton Blake, “that you have borne all you can bear. So have I. I'm in full retreat. Shall we go together?”

The younger man turned an apprehensive eye behind him.

“Nothing would please me more,” he said, “but I have a dim recollection that I asked somebody for this next dance. I can't think who it is, but I believe it is a young person Catharine Dudley has under her

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wing. It was Mrs. Dudley who presented me, I know."

The two stood for a moment in the shelter of the doorway looking out over the heads of the people who were chattering together in gay little groups or who passed by in couples and nodded to them over their shoulders. Then the younger Blake said, suddenly:

"Ah, there she is, that girl of Mrs. Dudley's! She's standing over there with the Tommy Carterets and Béatrix Faring. Do you see?" He pointed a finger. "She's a rather splendid young person, isn't she? I think I must claim my dance. By Jove, she *is* rather splendid! Do you know who it is she looks like? She looks like Lina Strozzi as Strozzi must have been some years ago. I wonder what her name is?"

His father did not answer immediately, and young Blake looked up at him to see if his attention had been diverted; but the elder man was staring straight at the young woman who resembled Lina Strozzi, and the sight must have been a severe shock of some nature, for his face bore a very odd expression—a fixed look such as his son had seen there but once or twice before in all his life, and that had been in brooding moments when the man had thought himself alone.

Young Blake thought that his father must be ill—he knew that the elder man's heart was none too good—and touched him gently on the arm, moving a step nearer in case of need; but after a moment the other

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turned his still face, and there was no sign of illness there, nor of any expression whatever.

"The name?" he asked. "I think the young lady's name is—Fleming. Yes, Fleming. Mrs. Dudley will be some sort of elder cousin to her, I believe. Probably she has been bringing her out." He looked back across the brilliant room to where the slim, dark-haired girl stood talking with her friends—a number of young men had added themselves to the group now—and after a moment gave a little tired sigh and turned away.

"I won't wait," he said. "I'm hideously bored. You'll be half an hour longer at least. You might stop in at my rooms when you come home. I sha'n't have gone to bed." He nodded and went off, and his son stood in the doorway for a little time frowning after him. He knew his father's moods and manners as very few sons do, for the two were uncommonly friendly, and, during the past ten years—since the younger man had left his university, in other words—had been a great deal together, sometimes under dangerous and trying conditions in remote parts of the world. In consequence of this he knew that the elder man had, in some sudden and mysterious fashion, suffered a twinge of severe physical pain or had been greatly disturbed by something from without. Men do not suddenly turn pale and haggard in a ball-room for nothing.

Of course, he thought at once of Mrs. Dudley's young protégée. They had been speaking of her

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and watching her when Creighton Blake had been so disturbed, but she was very evidently a young girl in her first season. There could have been nothing about her to make a man of five-and-fifty turn white. What else, then?

But suddenly young Blake gave an exclamation and burst out laughing, for he remembered the lady whom he had said this girl so remarkably resembled, and he knew that there were many men who might conceivably suffer a change of countenance at the mention of the lady's name. The probability that he had stumbled unawares upon a hitherto concealed romance of his father's amused him very much, and he was still laughing gently when he went across the ball-room to where the innocent cause of so much mystification stood surrounded by her friends.

He made his way among them, and reminded the girl that she was his property for the next dance. She nodded and smiled at him, but as the music had not yet begun, and as the circle of young men showed a jealous tendency to close in against his attack, he turned to the Carterets and Farings who stood near, and they admitted him to their conversation after the manner of old friends. They chaffed him on his repulse at the hands of the young men, and offered to make a wager with him at any terms he liked if he would try it again.

But Sybil Carteret nodded a sympathetic head and took his part, saying:

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"Never mind, Dicky! They're all much too young. Girls hate young men. It's the old and settled ones like you whom they adore. Wait till you've had your dance!—And a word in your ear! There's a balcony yonder, on the garden side of the house—a long, long balcony divided into something like *cabinets particuliers* by palms and things. You can drag her there and make love to her."

Young Blake laughed, and asked:

"What's her name? I don't even know her name." Mrs. Carteret told him that it was Vittoria Fleming, and he remembered that his father had known. He was thinking how odd that was when the waltz music began, and he forgot it again in his attack—successful this time, to the vociferous applause of the Carterets and Farings—upon the circle of the young men.

Miss Vittoria Fleming danced so much better than any one else Blake had ever known that he found himself, somewhat to his astonishment, taking a real and half-intoxicated delight in that hitherto despised entertainment. He and his father had often stood apart and jeered morosely at the ludicrous aspect of a roomful of otherwise sane people hopping or gliding gravely about with their arms round each other, albeit common civility sometimes demanded a like absurdity of themselves; but he was conscious that this girl danced because the necessity for dancing was in her soul—that she danced as naturally and with as instinctive a grace as leaves dance in a breeze;

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it was an expression of something in her and not a laboriously learned art. He forgot the passage of time and the things round him, and was conscious only of being swept away in a perfection of movement, as one is swept away in the surge and thrill of very beautiful music. Then suddenly they halted because the waltz was over, and Blake gave a little nervous laugh of surprise that it was so, and found himself looking into the eyes of Miss Vittoria Fleming, who also seemed a bit surprised and even displeased.

They were near the open windows which Sybil Carteret had pointed out, and he turned toward them, saying:

"There ought to be a balcony somewhere hereabouts unless I've been misinformed."

"Oh yes," said the girl, composedly. "The balcony is just outside these windows. I've already been there."

Blake looked at her and, in spite of himself, laughed. "Let's try for a breath of fresh air, then," said he. "I suppose I ought to return you to your chaperon, whoever that is, but I don't want to. I'm selfish."

"Oh, she doesn't matter," the girl said. "I'm with my cousin, Mrs. Dudley, but she's far from strict. I dare say you'd find her somewhere on this balcony herself if you wanted her. She's not the fierce sort of chaperon at all. I haven't seen her for a half-hour."

They went out through one of the long windows which were set close together down one side of the

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ball-room, and found themselves in a sort of tiny stall, set about and shut in by palms and flowering plants, for all the long balcony had been so divided into dim green nooks. There was a cushioned seat placed against the outer rail, and over it one made out the black outlines of roofs and chimneys against a starry sky. A certain effect of discretion was lent the place by the fact that the balcony was so narrow as to make impossible a complete retreat from the public eye. The two sitting there must dimly be seen from the lighted ball-room, though, in the half-darkness, identity was fairly lost.

They stood for a moment in silence looking out across the quiet sky, and then, turning, made themselves comfortable among the cushions. The girl sat leaning forward a little, and a shaft of light from the window before them fell warmly upon her face and across her round throat, and touched one shoulder. Blake looked down at her without speaking. Something of that unwonted intoxication of the senses which had stirred him was awake still, and it stirred afresh as he slowly realized the girl's great and uncommon beauty.

He did not know many girls, for he and his father spent most of their time in travel, and, as has been said, they went to very few dances, where, it may be taken for granted, girls abound as nowhere else. In consequence, he had rather the British or Continental idea of the young unmarried woman—the *jeune fille* as distinguished from her cousin in America,

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where the *jeune fille* does not exist. But he was not an obtuse man, and he realized that this girl was not at all the sort of young person whom he had shown such agility in avoiding.

He had called her, in pointing her out to his father, a rather splendid young person, and he remembered that now, and decided that the adjective had been well chosen. "Splendid" was the word. The girl's face and body and bearing all gave a curious effect of unusual vitality, and yet with it all there was no lack of delicate fineness. Most women of superabundant vitality appear florid and a bit coarse—as they often really are—like certain varieties of overgorgeous flowers, but Miss Vittoria Fleming was very far indeed from being anything of this sort. The quality in her seemed to be a certain potent magic of personality, a quality physical enough doubtless, but not to be described in terms of color or of line. Indeed, it cannot be described at all, for the strong personal magnetism which a few people exert upon almost all who come near them is quite beyond description.

Her likeness to a celebrated lady of the operatic world was, Blake found, less apparent at close-range than at a distance—where it was really striking—for the girl's mouth was shorter and fuller and her forehead quite different, and she had a better chin, and, in her cheeks a dull understain of red which never went quite away. The resemblance was closer in the strong, slim figure, and in a certain uncommon

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grace of movement—like an animal or a trained dancer.

"I wish you'd tell me something," he said at last, and the girl turned and looked up at him.

"Sybil Carteret," he went on, "told me that your name was Vittoria, and that is such an uncommon name for an American that it made me wonder. You don't look like an American either, you know. You look Latin. Why did they call you Vittoria?"

She shook her head with a little grave smile.

"I truly don't know," said she. "Possibly I've Italian blood. My mother's name was Bianca—I found that out by accident once." She caught the man's slight puzzled frown, and explained:

"You see, I've never known my mother. She died when I was a tiny child, and my father—well, her death affected my father very much indeed. He never speaks of her, and he never allows me to speak of her. I've never even seen a portrait of my mother. I expect that is rather odd, isn't it? But then we're extremely odd, my father and I—at least, we have lived oddly." She took her eyes from Blake's, and that deep understain of color in her cheeks heightened a very little. She said:

"You didn't ask for a family history, did you?"

But the man said, quickly:

"I'm asking for it now. Please go on. I'm interested, truly."

Miss Fleming looked up at him again in her grave, ungirlish fashion.

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"That's very civil of you," she said, after a little pause. "Of course, there's no reason why you should care to hear about my oddness." And Blake gave a sudden involuntary laugh. That had been such a very strange thing to say. He decided that the girl had a great deal to learn in the way of that inconsequential banter which makes social intercourse possible.

Oddly still, she went on to echo his thought.

"But I have no—small talk," she said. "Isn't that what it's called—small talk? I've never been taught it, and so if I'm to talk at all I might as well talk about me—about my father and me. It's all I know." She met the kindly laugh in the man's eyes, and her own eyes smiled back at him.

"I've always lived at Standish, our place in Connecticut," she said. "It's not far from Mickleford. Father and I have lived buried there ever since I can remember. We never have visitors, and we see none of the neighbors—there aren't many, anyhow—except Beau Temple."

"Beau Temple?" broke in the man. "Do you mean Beaumont Temple, the novelist?" And she nodded.

"Yes, he's an old friend of my father's—and of mine too—my only one, I fancy. Do you know him?"

"I've met him once or twice," Blake said. "I wish I knew him better, but, you see, he's rather a first-magnitude star. He's a very important person."

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She asked: "Have you read his books?"

Blake said: "Yes, oh yes! Some of them, that is. You see, I'm travelling a great deal. I don't get much of a chance. They're very fine, of course. One knows that." And the girl gave a sudden little laugh of amusement.

"Oh, confess you think them dull!" she said. "Well, I think they're dull, too, but Beau is a nice person, and I'm very, very fond of him. If it hadn't been for him I should long ago have forgotten the use of words. I should have become a vegetable, for father and I exchange about three sentences a day."

"And what else do you do at Standish?" inquired the man, "besides talking to Beaumont Temple? It sounds a wee bit monotonous."

"It is more than a wee bit monotonous," she said, frowning. "It is dreadful. And yet—until my cousin asked me to come to New York, I got on with it well enough. I had my dogs and my horse and always my books. I've read everything, I think." She broke out again into her sudden little laugh.

"I shocked a very dear old lady terribly the other day—Mrs. Crowly—by mentioning a book that I'd lately read—Weininger's *Sex and Character*. Do you think it's terrible for a girl to have read *Sex and Character*? I suppose you do."

"Well, really," said Blake, uneasily—"really, I don't know. I'm afraid I don't know any girls who go into things to quite that extent." He began to

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laugh, and he shook his head at her in a sort of mock despair.

"You don't really exist, of course," said he. "I know I'm imagining all this. You never existed outside of mid-Victorian fiction. If you were real you'd be very lean, and you'd have thin, tight hair and spectacles. And you certainly wouldn't dance as you do. Oh no! I don't believe in you at all.—Tell me," he demanded, abruptly, "how did you, shut up in a country-house with a hermit and a lot of books, learn to dance like—like *that*?"

The dark understain of color in the girl's cheeks deepened again and she looked away.

"I don't know," she said, half under her breath—"oh, I don't know! I danced with the wind, I suppose. I suppose I danced with the leaves and the sunlight on the garden-path. I don't know." And that seemed to the man to be one of the quaintest and one of the most pathetic little speeches he had ever heard. But she turned to him with a swift impulse, her great dark eyes searching him for mockery.

"Please don't laugh," she said, quickly. "That was a silly thing to say, but—I hate to be laughed at." The voice died away, but the girl sat where she was, quite still, her eyes upon Blake's eyes, and the faces of both of them were grave and unsmiling.

After a little the man shook his head.

"Did you think I'd laugh?" he asked. And after a moment more she looked away and bent her beautiful head, and he saw her take one very deep breath,

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and saw her hands clasp and unclasp in her lap. In the end she said:

"No . . . no. I think you'd understand."

Before them, out in the lighted ball-room, the music was playing again and dancers whirled past their retreat, but the two neither heard nor saw. An odd fit of constraint came upon them, a sort of embarrassment—a tacit recognition of that sudden, still moment of meeting eyes. And the man, very manlike, sought refuge from it in a wholly banal speech. He said:

"How do you like it here in New York? Is it better than Standish and your books?"

She nodded her head, and, after a moment, abruptly that amazing flush of life and splendid youth transfigured her.

"I love it!" she cried out. "I've had the most wonderful time this winter. The most fairy-princess sort of a time. You see, I've been visiting my cousin, Mrs. Dudley. She brought me out in December, and at Christmas we had a huge house-party at her Tuxedo place, and then six weeks of dances and opera and theatres and things here in town, and then in Lent we went to Palm Beach, which I adored, and now here I am in town again, and this is the last dance of the season, and I could cry. Oh, you can't conceive what a heavenly time I've had! Fancy these past four or five months after all those years in the country!

"I love it!" she cried again. "It's living, really,

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truly living! I didn't know what that was before. I only dreamed about it. . . . I suppose I only know the first steps of it now, but I love it. . . . I feel as if I'd been cheated out of something beautiful and thrilling all my life. I feel as if I'd always been in the dark. Well, I'm in the sun now, and I love it." She turned toward the man with shining eyes, her hands at her breast.

"I want to live!" she said. "I do want to live! Life is so very wonderful. One ought to find such wonderful things in it. . . . Oh, I want to live, even if it hurts me sometimes. You don't know how I want it!" And once again that evening Blake thought he had seldom heard a more pathetic little speech. The girl seemed to him like a child in a dim room stretching its tiny arms toward the light of the window.

In spite of her appalling catholicity in the matter of literature, she knew so pitifully little of that life she cried out for!

"Your father lived, I take it," said he, "and it seems to have hurt him rather badly." But the girl's eager, flushed face did not change.

"However cruelly life may hurt me," she said, "I want to live. It's in me to want to live—to crave it."

And the man felt all at once convinced that she spoke the truth, even though she spoke as a child speaks—in utter ignorance.

He nodded his head very gravely once or twice, and said:

"Yes, it's in you, I think. Life, such as you speak

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of, is rather sure to come to you. You're young and brave and very eager for happiness—all the kinds of happiness there are. And—if I may say it without offence—you're very beautiful. Oh yes, what you crave is sure to come to you—for good or ill."

"For good or ill," said the girl, "I want it. I am not afraid." And again he nodded very gravely at her, saying:

"No, I'm sure of that. Perhaps you'd better be. Life is rather terrible sometimes."

"I am not afraid," the girl repeated.

She looked past him, as if she were looking toward that future she sought so eagerly, as if she were trying to pierce the veil that cloaked it, and as if she chafed at the obscurity. Her eyes were wide and fearless, and her red lips were drawn tight together. All her slim, strong body seemed, as it were, to press forward to the quest, unhesitating, insistent. But the man who sat beside her drew a quick little sigh, for, though he was not a very fanciful man, he was conscious of an odd uneasiness. And he was aware that he was afraid for her, though of what he could not have told.

So these two sat in silence for a little time; it may have been no more than a minute, but to the man it was very long. Then at last, as if she realized quite suddenly how grave they had become and how far they had strayed from a ball-room atmosphere, the girl broke into a half-bewildered, half-amused little laugh, and once more leaned back among her silken cushions.

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"Will you be good enough to forgive me for my ravings?" she asked. "I must seem very, very young to you and very foolish! Don't I? But you've been so astonishingly good-natured over it!"

"Substitute sympathetic for good-natured," said Blake, "and I won't complain. If you've done me the honor of being frank with me—telling me the things you think and feel, it seems to me that I ought to be very grateful. It's an unusual compliment."

The girl looked up at him swiftly and away again, and she said:

"Thank you. You're—very good, you know."

And after a moment, she said:

"Somebody else would have laughed, but you—understand things. . . . I'm glad."

The dance-music had stopped again, and presently Miss Fleming became aware of it, and asked to be taken to her chaperon, saying that by this time searching parties were doubtless on foot in her pursuit. But when they had risen to go she paused a moment, and, turning, looked once at the quiet, starlit sky, and once round her at the palms and flowering plants which hemmed in their narrow retreat, and for the smallest moment she looked up into Blake's eyes, and then moved away. It was curiously eloquent. She could not have said so much, the man realized, in many words. Indeed, she could not have said it at all—her swift, little, regretful farewell; but he understood, and was conscious again of that inward stir which her dancing had first wakened in him, and which the

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straight glance of her eyes had rekindled afterward. Already a strange little sense of intimacy had come upon the two—a very thin and frail thread, as it were, invisible, but binding their lives together for good or ill.

So, without further words, they went out into the ball-room and down its thronged length. At the far end they found Mrs. Dudley, and Blake left the girl there—only to see her at once snapped up by a youth whom he heartily disliked. Then he found his hostess, made his adieux, and presently was in the street.

He had, in his hasty leave-taking, failed to observe an odd bit of by-play for which he was in part responsible, but, even if he had seen and heard it, it would have conveyed nothing to him whatever, so his loss was small. His progress down the ball-room with Vittoria Fleming had been eyed with a strange excitement by a certain elderly gentleman who for many years had figured rather prominently in New York's social life. This gentleman at last seized by the arm another elderly gentleman who was passing by, and, still in great excitement, whispered:

“Look there! Look there! Do you see young Richard Blake walking with that Fleming girl whom Catharine Dudley is bringing out? Do you see?”

The second elderly gentleman, blinking confusedly, admitted that he saw, and asked, “What of it?” Whereupon the other again repeated the names.

“Don't you understand? *Blake—Blake!* Young

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Richard Blake and Pender Fleming's girl!" And at that the second elderly gentleman burst suddenly into a strange laugh, and began to stare, saying:

"Good God! Fleming's girl! . . . Good God, I say! That is a queer trick! Eh! What?"

"Very queer, indeed!" agreed the first elderly gentleman.

II

BLAKE PÈRE LOSES A HAND TO FATE

IT was a warm night of late spring, clear and starry, as has been said, and Blake turned down the Avenue on foot. Beyond the long line of waiting carriages he crossed to the Park side, which was deserted at that hour, and walked slowly on his way beside the low stone wall. He went without haste, because he had not very far to go—a matter of possibly a mile and a half—and he wished time and solitude to think. He realized that he had, on that evening, been more profoundly moved by a woman's charm than for a very long time—probably more than ever before, and he was disturbed by it, and a little angry and a little alarmed, for he had no intention of losing that complete freedom of his which he prized more than anything else in the world. The alarm, if so strong a word can be used, arose from the fact that he knew himself rather better than do most young men of his age. He was, at this time, one-and-thirty, but in the course of his roving career he had been through more diverse experiences than most men who remain respectably at home ever meet in the whole span of a long lifetime. And, as

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the fruit of these experiences, he knew that he was in peculiar danger so long as he allowed himself to be near Miss Vittoria Fleming or even to think much about her. For each human being in this world there is one other being, or perhaps there are two or three, whose attraction is so powerful that it overwhelms all other considerations, all obstacles, all laws—if such be in the way—all matters of right and wrong. Most people never meet this strange complement to themselves, but, in the rare cases in which the meeting has been brought about, the world's great romances have been enacted, and sometimes history has been made or unmade.

Young Blake, as he walked slowly south on the soft earth beside the low Park wall, looked his Fate in the face, and acknowledged it gravely with no pretence of non-recognition; for he knew well that unless he made a determined effort to avoid Vittoria Fleming, his life would be taken out of his hands and stirred and moved and at length settled for good or ill together with her life. But he passionately desired his freedom, and as he walked, without being conscious of it, he quickened his pace to a sort of fierce march, and he struck savagely at the ground with the stick in his hand and swore a determined oath that neither this girl nor any other being should rob him of that which he held so dear, should turn him—as he put it to himself—into a tame cat purring beside the domestic hearth!—an attender of dances!—an opera-box ornament!—the father of a family!

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He gave a sort of bellow of rage as he saw himself in these various capacities, and a lone policeman standing under a lamp-post at the Fifty-ninth Street entrance of the Park looked at him with not unnatural suspicion, and even followed a step or two after him, debating with himself whether the man might not be mad.

But in the end he came to the lofty and ornate building in Forty-fourth Street which gives expensive shelter to bachelors, and where he and his father had—in different stories—their chambers. The lift-boy told him that Mr. Blake senior had come in nearly an hour before, and so he went at once to his father's rooms. He found Creighton Blake hanging over a table whereupon was spread a large map of the South Pacific Ocean, measuring off the distances between certain island groups, and making notes of these with a pencil and a bit of paper. He gave over his employment at his son's entrance, and motioned to the other side of the room, where stood decanters and siphons of soda-water and smoking things. The younger man had already laid off his coat and hat, and had moved in the direction indicated without waiting to be pressed.

He turned back with a cigarette between his lips and the ice clinking cheerfully in his long glass.

"I walked down the Avenue," he explained. "That's why I've been so long. I wanted a breath of fresh air after those overheated rooms."

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"Did you have your dance with the pretty girl?" inquired his father. And young Blake said:

"With the girl who looks like Lina Strozzi?—yes; oh yes, I had it." He permitted himself a little, gentle laugh, and grinned across at the man who sat by the table, but Blake père, if he had seemed to betray emotion over this matter earlier in the evening, certainly had recovered meanwhile, for his face showed no more than a mild and rather perfunctory interest.

"She is certainly a very beautiful girl," the other went on, "and, though I haven't played with little girls much, I should think she is unusually interesting. She has—charm—extraordinary charm." He spoke with no enthusiasm, but rather critically, as one making an admission against his will.

The other man said:

"Yes, yes; quite so!" in an absent tone. And after a moment he said:

"That's high praise—from you."

But his son made a deprecatory gesture. He said:

"Oh, well, one must admit that Miss Fleming is rather unusual. I don't mean to rave over her. I merely speak in the terms I should use if I had seen an uncommonly fine picture or heard a new opera that pleased me. The girl has—a personality. . . . And she's amazingly vital, somehow. Yes, vital. I think she has a sort of passion for life. She has lived shut up in a country-house for most of her life."

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"Yes," said the elder man, under his breath. It was as if he spoke to himself.

"Standish," he said, nodding.

His son turned and stared at him.

"Now, how the devil did you know that?" he cried, and he thought that for just an instant his father looked startled. But if so, it was for no more than an instant, and he said, indifferently:

"I think some one told me—some one who was speaking of this Miss Fleming to-night. She is Pender Fleming's daughter, you know—or you don't know, probably. He was before your time—older than I am."

The younger man began to walk back and forth across the room, holding his glass in one hand.

"A sort of passion for life," he said, frowning thoughtfully. "I wonder how it'll end with her—an extraordinarily beautiful young creature like that, popped suddenly into the world with a prodigious hunger for happiness, and no standards of experience to go by. By Jove, I—wonder! You know, there's something rather tragic about it—and there's tragedy in her face too. . . . I saw it. Real tragedy. I wonder—"

He wheeled about swiftly, for the elder man had uttered a sharp exclamation that was followed by a little crash upon the littered table before him, as if he had struck it a blow with his hand. He leaned forward as he sat, and his face, in the concentrated glow of the electric reading-light, seemed to work a little and to settle into deep lines.

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"Are you preparing to fall in love with Vittoria Fleming?" he demanded.

His son gave a short laugh of utter amazement.

"Fall in love with her?" he cried. "In love? Good God, no! What are you thinking of?"

"Your words certainly have that sound," said Blake père, sharply.

"Well, then, they sound wrong," retorted his son. "I'm not falling in love with anybody, thank you!"

The other bent his head, and his fingers played and tapped upon the outspread map before him. After a little silence, he said, in a different tone:

"It would be—very unfortunate. I should be more sorry than I can say." But his son laughed again, saying, easily:

"Well, you may set your mind quite at rest. I have no intention of falling in love, and I certainly have no intention of allowing my freedom to be interfered with in any way. As to marriage, I think I have no vocation for that. I've roamed too much. I'm no more apt to marry than you are to marry again. We're both confirmed wanderers, I fancy."

The elder man's face relaxed slightly, and he gave a faint smile.

"I dare say I'm alarming myself causelessly," he admitted. "I must be getting old when I begin to assume the anxious-hen-with-one-chick attitude. Yes, I must be getting old. Still," he said, frowning down at his outspread hands, "I wish you—I wish you hadn't met this young lady. Doubtless your in-

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tentions are firm enough, but I wish you hadn't met her. I should be more sorry than I can say if . . . very unfortunate." His voice trailed away into silence, and the younger man was left staring at him with a sort of exasperation.

"Hang it, father!" he broke out at last, "I can't say anything stronger than I've already said! I'm not in love. I don't mean to fall in love, and that's all there is of it. I'm not quite an inexperienced school-boy, you know. I've served my apprenticeship in—in what are called love-affairs, and they're not—well, they're not as labelled. They're not up to specifications. Besides, this is a young girl, and a love-affair with her would naturally mean marriage. May I be hanged before I'm married!"

He began again his restless march back and forth across the room, but, after a little, halted again near where his father sat.

"And still," said he, "I don't quite understand your uncommon vehemence about this particular girl—about Miss Vittoria Fleming. If one were going to fall in love at all—which I am not—why not with her? What's wrong with her? I take it you wouldn't fly into a passion if I had been dancing with Marian Cobham, or with Caroline Stanley, or any other of the hundred we saw this evening. Why this anguish over Vittoria Fleming?"

The elder man stirred in his chair.

"Oh, I—I don't know," he said, slowly. "You see, it happened to be Miss Fleming, not one of the

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others. . . . That's all. . . . And perhaps—perhaps in the glimpse I had of her, I saw what you seem to have seen, an atmosphere of—tragedy. She has tragedy in her face and about her.” The man's head was bent over the table, and he said something further in a low tone. Young Blake did not hear the words, and asked:

“What? I beg your pardon?” His father shook his head.

“Nothing!”

But what he had said was:

“Small wonder! Oh, small wonder!”

And after that he said no more for a long time, only sat with bent head, his hands stretched out before him, the fingers moving idly about upon the map of the South Pacific Ocean. But at last he drew a long sigh, and rose to his feet. He made a gesture with both hands which seemed definitely to dismiss the subject they had been discussing—to say, “Enough! No more of that!”—and he took a fresh cigar, throwing away the one which he had allowed to die out, and lighted it, and puffed a few great clouds of smoke.

“I've been checking up my probable wanderings for the next six or eight months,” he said—“as much as I care to check them in advance, that is. Actually, I mean to move where and when the spirit stirs me.”

“You're off at the end of this week then?” asked the younger man, and Creighton Blake nodded.

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"I sail from Vancouver on the twentieth," said he. "I reach Suva in the Fijis in fifteen days. McNaughton meets me there with the schooner, and then—the world's before me; at least, the South Seas are."

He turned quickly, as if a sudden thought had struck him.

"Chuck up your Armenian idea and come with me!" he said. "By Jove, why not? You can go there any time. Ararat and the ark will wait. Come with me."

The younger man stared.

"Oh, I say!" he exclaimed, "how about your Australian? How about McNaughton? And, for that matter, how about the people I'm to go to Armenia with?"

"Hang McNaughton!" said his father. "There's room in the schooner for a third. We could manage easily enough." He came a pace nearer with a sort of excitement in his usually still face.

"Come with me!" he insisted. "Let your people go without you. I particularly wish you'd come."

The younger man sat against the edge of the big table, and regarded his father with a frowning, puzzled smile. It struck him that the elder man had been all the evening behaving very oddly, and in a manner singularly unlike himself.

"Yes, but look here!" he objected. "We've talked this all over before, and decided to go different ways. It was really your own plan to go off with this McNaughton. You practically turned me

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out of it when I suggested joining you. I don't understand."

"I suppose a man may change his mind?" said the other. He looked a bit defiant—rather like an elderly boy who knows that he is acting foolishly, but persists in it out of sheer stubbornness.

"Change your plans and come with us!" he urged again. And quite suddenly the other man was aware that his father was trying to get him away from New York, and from—whom? Trying to make sure of him by having him under his own eye. And with that a wave of anger flared up in him, for he conceived that he was being treated like a child. He stood up, frowning.

"Oh, this is nonsense!" he said, impatiently. "We can't both change our plans this late in the day. You know quite well that yours would be altogether deranged by my coming with you." He looked into his father's eyes with a brief laugh that was almost of scorn.

"You *are* rather assuming the anxious-hen-with-one-chick attitude, aren't you?" said he. "Don't, I beg of you! It's a long time since I was a chick. I'm quite able-bodied, and no more foolish than I shall always be."

Abruptly the elder man's flush of eagerness fled from him, and he seemed to shrink within himself. He looked all at once tired and old.

"Ah, well, as you like! As you like!" he said, querulously. "You've grown up, as you say."

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The other had taken up his hat and coat in preparation to leaving the room, but he moved nearer to him and touched his son on the arm.

"I don't want to seem altogether an old woman," said he, "but—that girl, you know. Keep away! Keep away! Don't see any more of her. Put it as a sort of favor to me, if you like."

A little mischievous whim seized the younger man.

"Fate may be working against you, you know," he laughed. "One can't fight Fate."

Creighton Blake gave a sudden violent shiver and turned back to his table. He said:

"Good-night! Good-night!" over his shoulder in an abrupt tone, and the younger man closed his father's door and went away wondering.

III

APPEARS DONNA BIANCA

IT was late when Mrs. Dudley and her charge left the dance to go home. Vittoria had been so very much in demand, and had been so obviously experiencing what low people would term "the time of her life," that her duenna had lacked the heart to force the girl to an earlier departure. Moreover, truth to tell, the elder lady herself had been far from dull, for she was still young—two or three and thirty—and she was very popular both among her own sex and among men.

But when they were at last tucked away in the softly cushioned, softly lighted interior of the electric brougham, and were rolling homeward up the Avenue, she was a little tired and sleepy, and made pretence of being more so, to the end of insuring silence, for she wanted a space in which to think and to prepare a course of action before that inevitable symposium of impressions and recollections which, for all women, intervenes between an important social event and bed.

The exigencies of common civility had compelled her, much against her will, to ask Richard Blake

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to call, and she wondered if certain other exigencies did not demand that she and Vittoria Fleming, or at least Vittoria, should avoid seeing him if he chose to take advantage of her invitation. She liked Blake very much indeed, as did almost all who knew him, but she was aware of certain facts which not unreasonably seemed to her to make it impossible that he and the girl who was in her charge should see much of each other or should run the risk of awakening between them any interest.

It has been said that she was a rather young woman, and therefore the things she knew about this matter were necessarily hearsay and report; still, the very facts, whatever softening and extenuating circumstances may have draped them, were clear enough, and, even to Mrs. Dudley, who was a very modern person and no prude, they seemed to loom very high across the path of Vittoria Fleming and Richard Blake—an unsurmountable obstruction, with "*Rue Barree*" printed black across it.

So she leaned back in her corner of the brougham with closed eyes, and tried to think what she must do in the perfectly possible event of these two perfectly impossible young people taking a fancy to each other.

It was completely out of the question to tell Vittoria frankly what she knew, and, without that recourse, it might be a very difficult affair to manage. It came to Mrs. Dudley suddenly that young girls, though very refreshing, were rather a nuisance, and

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she was almost glad she had none of her own, though hitherto her childless state had been the sole sorrow of her life.

She had progressed not a step on her way of preparation when they reached home, and no further when, somewhat later, Miss Fleming knocked at the door of her dressing-room and asked if she might come in for a few minutes before going to bed.

She said "yes" in the apprehensive tone of a student who, entirely without preparation, enters his class-room to be examined in a term's work. She was sitting before her dressing-table, and her maid, a silent, middle-aged Swiss, who understood English only when it was pronounced very slowly and very distinctly, was doing her hair for the night; but she called over her shoulder, and the girl moved up beside her and stood there a moment before settling herself in a near-by chair.

She was in a thin silk dressing-gown that, with every movement of her beautiful young body, lay close and veil-like, and Mrs. Dudley cried out in admiration and despair when she saw her. The girl was so slender that with less perfect modelling she must have been thin, but in reality so round and compact and deep-chested was she that, to borrow Catharine Dudley's vigorous phrase, "she had not a bone to her name." There is in English no name for this rare condition, but a Frenchman would have called the girl a "*faussé maigre*," and so expressed the matter perfectly.

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"My dear child," said the elder woman, "it is a very good thing for us both that I have never had any illusions about my personal appearance. If I were in the least vain, I shouldn't be able to bear having such a creature as you near me. I should scratch your eyes out in sheer rage. I suppose you know that you are a great beauty? Heaps of people must have told you so."

The girl colored and gave an embarrassed little laugh.

"I'm glad you think me pretty," she said. "I'm very glad. There's been nobody to tell me so, you see, until I came to New York—even if any one thought it."

"How many men told you so to-night?" demanded Mrs. Dudley, and watched the dark color again flood up into Vittoria Fleming's cheeks.

"I think only one," she said, simply. "Directly, that is. And," she added, "I suppose I mustn't tell who he was. That wouldn't be quite fair, would it?"

Mrs. Dudley came as near roaring with laughter as a lady may, but the girl went on, quite soberly:

"And, anyhow, I look like a thin squaw or something of the sort beside such beauties as Mrs. Faring and Mrs. Rivers. I looked like a starved immigrant with a print handkerchief over her head. Mrs. Rivers is the most beautiful person I have ever seen or heard of."

"Yes, she is very, very beautiful," agreed the elder woman, "and so is Béatrix Faring, though people are

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beginning to call Béatrix statuesque and handsome, and that's the beginning of her downfall. That's what comes to every great beauty. She marries and continues to reign for a little time, and then she begins to take on more weight, and quite suddenly she is cut out by some new girl. Mrs. Rivers is reigning just now, and she is splendid beyond words, but if I'm not mistaken you'll damage her severely before another season is out. You see, my dear, you have something that none of those others have—not Béatrix Faring, nor Sybil Carteret, nor even Mrs. Rivers. Your type is entirely exotic. All these others have been the usual sort of Anglo-Saxon beauty raised to the n^{th} degree. You're pure Latin, and that gives you a great advantage. You're unusual. That's because your mother was Italian, of course."

"Ah!" cried the girl. "Then she *was* Italian?" Mrs. Dudley stared at her.

"Do you mean to say you didn't know?"

The girl shook her head.

"Her death nearly killed my father," said she, "and he never speaks of her or allows me to. I know her name was Bianca, and that, with my name, made me sure that she must have been Italian. But that's quite all I know. You see, there has been no one to tell me, and I've become so used, all my life, to avoiding any mention of her that I can't make her seem at all real to me. It's as if I never had any mother at all."

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Mrs. Dudley looked across at the girl, frowning thoughtfully, and after a little she said:

"You poor baby!

"Yes," she said, after another pause, "I knew Pender was terribly—affected and—changed. Though Heaven knows he was always sombre enough! But I didn't know how he carried it to that extreme. You poor, dear child!"

The girl leaned forward with eager, flushed cheeks and pleading eyes.

"Would you mind?" she said. "Do you think you could—could tell me a little about my mother? Did you ever know her or even see her? . . . Even any littlest bit of a thing, to make her real to me. I should love it so! . . . It seems to me rather terrible for a girl never to have any mother, not even a scrap of one. . . . Couldn't you tell me a little about her?"

A quick moisture of tears had come to the girl's dark eyes and her lips were trembling. She seemed to the elder woman a poignantly pathetic figure, this splendid young beauty who begged with tears for "even the littlest bit of a thing" to make her mother real to her.

"Oh, my dear," she cried, "I wish I could give you more than I can! I know so little! I saw your mother only once or twice, I think. You see, I was a child when she married your father—eight or ten. I remember only that she was very beautiful and kind and sweet, and that every one loved her. She had wistful, pleading eyes, I know. I realized that, young

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as I was. And I remember very well the one time I actually met her. It was at old Mrs. Crowley's—Aunt Arabella Crowley, as every one calls her—down in Gramercy Park. I forget why I was taken there, but I remember that when we went into the drawing-room your beautiful mother was there, talking to Aunt Arabella. I was a stumpy, ill-natured little brat at that time, and hideously shy, but when she put her arm about me, and kissed my cheek, and began to talk to me, not as grown-ups talk to children, tolerantly from their mountain-top, but woman to woman, as it were, I simply grovelled at her feet. I know that I used to dream about her for years after that, and, when I read fairy tales and such, the fairy princess was always your mother. . . . As a matter of fact, I believe she *was* a sort of princess in her own right. I know before she was married she used to be called 'Donna Bianca,' and some one once told me that her father, who had died long since, was Prince Cornaro (her mother was English); whether or not he was the head of his family I don't know, but I suppose, in any case, you've a right to the title, and if it's the Venetian Cornaro, you come of a very old and illustrious house, my dear. There was a real queen among them once. Caterina Cornaro was Queen of Cyprus until she was cheated out of it. I don't know where the later title came from—the princely one. I suppose it must have been papal. Those great Venetian houses didn't use titles ordinarily, did they?

Vittoria did not seem very greatly impressed by

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her ancient and illustrious descent, for she sat for a long time silent, smiling a little, her eyes wide and absent, her hands clasped in her lap. But at last she said:

"Oh, thank you for telling me about her! Thank you more than I can say. It's not a little. It's a great deal. I shall be able to think of her now as she was. I shall have a real mother at last." Two tears which had been brimming in her eyes fell and wet her flushed cheeks, but they were tears of joy and not of sorrow.

"I shall have a real mother at last," she said again—"a beautiful, tender, fairy-princess mother to dream of and talk to. Oh, it was cruel of them to cheat me out of my mother for so long!"

Mrs. Dudley bent forward and kissed her.

"Yes, my dear," said she. "I think it was cruel, too. And I'm glad to have been able to tell you even this little about her. I'm sorry that I know—that I can tell no more."

"And now," she said, "tell me about this dance to-night. Had you a good time? And did heaps of young men make violent love to you?"

Vittoria met her change of tone with a quick smile and brightening eyes.

"A heavenly time!" said she. "Ah, a heavenly time! But no young men made violent love to me; that is, I think not. Of course, sometimes one can't be quite sure. Oh, by the way . . . I met a new man to-night. . . . I think I like him very much.

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He had nice eyes and a nice smile. . . . And he understands . . . things. . . . A weather-beaten-looking man—as if he had been in the sun and wind a great deal—his name was Blake. Do you know him well? I haven't seen him at any of the other things this winter—not even at the opera.”

Mrs. Dudley took a long breath. It was come at last, then. And she had imagined herself, for the present, safe.

“Blake?” she asked. “Do you mean the father or the son, I wonder? They usually go about in a pair.”

“Oh, it would be the son, I'm sure,” said Vittoria. “But I fancy I saw the father too, if there is one. He was standing in a doorway with the other—that was before my dance with the younger one—and I met his eye. A tired man with gray hair.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Dudley, slowly. “A tired man: that's Creighton Blake. Yes, he's very tired, I think—and not too happy. He spends his life travelling about in strange places. Possibly he thinks they'll rest him, but I doubt if they do. The son, Richard, I hardly know. No, I don't know him well. He is not in New York much. Of course, I asked him to call when he brought you to me after your dance. I almost had to, for after all I have known him slightly for a long time. . . . But—Well, I don't know.”

“You don't like him?” said the girl, quickly.

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"Why? He seemed to me to be a man I should trust . . . with anything. A strong sort of man. What is wrong with him?"

Mrs. Dudley moved uneasily in her chair and avoided the girl's glance. Her face showed a rather absurd distress, for she was naturally a very honest and direct woman, and, in this instance, honesty and directness were out of the question. Another sort of woman could have told damaging lies about poor Blake, and eased her conscience with the argument Jesuitical. But it was difficult for Catharine Dudley to lie. She lacked practice.

"I don't know," she said again, with a troubled frown. "It is not easy to say just what I feel. I don't want to be unjust to Richard Blake. I rather like him. But—when it's a matter of a young girl, I don't know. He has figured in one or two romantic complications that might alarm a mother somewhat. I can't quite explain—" She halted, a bit flushed and breathless, for she found the matter difficult, though she had spoken no more than the exact truth.

"Oh, you can tell me anything," said Vittoria, composedly. "I've always been allowed to read whatever I liked, you see, and I know about most things—though I'm a girl, and so supposed to be a fool."

Mrs. Dudley uttered a faint and plaintive, "My dear! My dear!" but the girl went on, quite calmly:

"I don't in the least mind a man's having had what are called 'affairs'—I think I heartily dislike

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good young men—so long as the affairs were not cowardly or mean, and did not take advantage of anybody's weakness. I can't believe that Mr. Blake has ever done any of those things. Do you know that he has?"

"No," said the elder woman, honestly, "I don't know that he has, and I don't believe that he has. And, still, the tendency to 'affairs' is not a very promising or safe tendency. I think such men are better left alone—by girls, that is. Besides, he has the roaming habit. He's always off for some remote and unknown land or sea. He's a sort of gentleman vagabond—if that means anything. Vagabonds have a kind of romantic interest, my dear, but they're impossible on the practical side. They love and ride away."

"Mr. Blake hasn't loved me yet," objected the girl, quite reasonably. "And I've no cause at all for thinking that he ever will." She halted upon that, for she realized that she was saying something she believed to be untrue. There was the matter of that long, still look on the balcony outside the ball-room: the matter of that mysterious and nameless presence which each of the two knew well the other had thrilled to. . . . And he had said that she was beautiful—albeit in sober argument, not love-making.

Little enough, all this! But out of far less a girl's young fancy builds Spanish castles of beauty and delight, and dwells therein.

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"In any case," she said, "you have asked him to call. And I shall see him unless you forbid me. I liked him, you know."

"Oh," said the badgered Mrs. Dudley, plaintively again, "I shouldn't think of going so far as that. I shouldn't think of forbidding you anything, child. But I truly believe— Ah, well, perhaps he won't call. Then everything will be all right."

Miss Fleming allowed herself a slight smile.

"I think he will call," said she. "Yes, I think he'll call."

Then, because it was very late, she kissed her cousin an affectionate good-night and went to her own room. Her maid had taken away the discarded clothes, and had gone herself, leaving everything ready for the night—the windows darkened, for morning was already gray outside, and one or two of the lights on.

Vittoria slipped off her silk dressing-gown and put out the lights. She stood a moment beside her bed in the darkness, and she strained her eyes to lift through that darkness the "purple-painted headlands" of the life which was to come to her and the love which was to make it sweet. She was without coherent thought, but oddly her tongue formed words. It said again, without her conscious direction, what it had said some hours before to Richard Blake on the balcony. It said:

"I want to live! . . . I want to live! Life is so very wonderful! One ought to find such wonderful

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things in it. . . . Oh, I want to live, even if it hurts me sometimes! You don't know how I want it!"

Out of the gloom a deep and very gentle voice warned:

"Life is rather terrible sometimes."

But again the girl's tongue, unbidden, said:

"I'm not afraid."

The words had almost the sound of a battle-cry—a defiance flung in the face of Destiny.

IV

“‘HE COMETH NOT,’ SHE SAID”

VITTORIA'S first thought when she awoke on the following morning—or, to be accurate, on the following noon—was of her mother, the perfectly new and incredibly beautiful fairy-princess mother. And she lay for a long time in that delicious borderland between sleep and waking, and made up things about the woman who had borne her—made a picture of her, sweet and winning, infinitely tender, with “wistful eyes” (as Catharine Dudley had said).

The girl had preserved certain very child-like qualities through living much alone. Like all children, she was given to “pretending,” and now she had a new and delectable theme to expand—the mother they had cheated her of—the mother who had suddenly become real and near and dear after so very long.

But from that, as she wakened more fully, her thoughts drifted by easy degrees to the evening past, and suddenly her cheeks stung with a swift warmth and her eyes opened wide. She said, aloud:

“He'll come to-day!” And, at once, as if she imagined him to be already ringing at the door, she

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fell into a breathless and feverish haste of preparation for the day which left her maid, a phlegmatic woman, panting resentfully in the rear.

Blake did not come.

From close upon five until it was dressing-time she waited, smiling, confident, beside the tea-table, her eyes furtively upon the door. Each time that the admirable Mallow appeared in the doorway, pressing the heavy hanging deferentially aside, and lifting his solemn tones in announcement, her heart gave a swift leap which was almost a physical pain, and she was deaf and blind to the faces and voices about her. But as the last of the people who had come in departed, and Mrs. Dudley, stifling a yawn, said, "Dear me! Half after six!" she rose a little pale, and, without speaking, went quickly up to her own room. There, of course, after the first flood of disappointment, something like reason came to her. So many scores of perfectly commonplace things might have kept him away!

She laughed and turned to her dressing.

"He'll come to-morrow," she said, but, with all considerations admitted, was still conscious of a remaining film of disappointment. If he had really cared he would have let nothing keep him away.

And again he did not come.

Vittoria this time had herself better in hand, but she went up to dress for dinner bewildered and a little dismayed. Half-way through with her toilet the thought came to her that he had never expressed

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any intention of coming at all. He had thanked Mrs. Dudley for her invitation, looked once into Vittoria's eyes, and gone away.

And yet in all her being she knew that their meeting had been no casual thing to him.

"I know it! I know it!" she said to herself, fiercely. Unawares, she spoke aloud, and, from across the room, her maid stared curiously.

This was Wednesday. On the next day she again waited in vain, but in the evening she saw Blake at the theatre. She was with a party of people who filled two adjoining lower boxes. A new English musical-comedy was being played, and the house was full; but Vittoria had noticed idly during the first act that on the aisle, very near by, a single seat remained empty. With the beginning of the second act Richard Blake occupied the seat. She had not seen him come in. He had slipped into the place after the lights of the intermission were lowered and the curtain had risen.

She saw that he was quite alone, and that he did not seem very much amused or interested by the musical-comedy; for though he watched the stage almost without any movement of any sort, he did not smile or applaud with the rest of the house, and it seemed to her that he even wore a very slight and constant frown. When the piece was over he took up his hat and moved out with the throng, not looking about him, and so went from her sight.

On Saturday evening they met at a dinner-party.

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Blake appeared there because his host was one of the men with whom he expected later on to go to Armenia—a friend of many years' standing. Certainly he would have remained away if it had occurred to him that by any possibility he might encounter Vittoria Fleming, for he was quite resolute in his determination to avoid her—the more resolute since, to his angry amazement, she continued to haunt his mind, both waking and sleeping.

He arrived rather late and hurried into the drawing-room, surreptitiously slipping the card which had been given him out of its little envelope, and trying to read the name written on it as he went.

He had not managed to do this, however, by the time he reached his hostess, and so held the card in his hand while he apologized to her for his tardiness, and waited for a later chance. She turned away presently to greet another late-comer, but said, over her shoulder:

“You take in Miss Fleming, don't you? There she is, behind you.” And the man wheeled about, and found himself looking into Vittoria Fleming's beautiful face.

It was as if the week had not been. The amazing potency which this girl's nearness wielded upon him seized him afresh like a gripping hand, and he was afraid and angry together, as he had been angry for the past few days, for he liked to think himself strong after the manner of men, not knowing, as women know, that weakness is strength too.

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He managed, however, to pronounce the more or less sane platitudes that are appropriate to such occasions, and he was conscious that he pronounced them quite glibly enough, as he would have done through the stress of much greater emotion, and almost at once they went in to dinner. Vittoria said very little. She was waiting to see if he would not make some explanation of his failure to call—some little reference, at least, to that evening of their first meeting—some word more intimate than his commonplace civilities—some little thing to carry them on from the point of parting, to show that she was different to him from these others who smiled and chattered and seemed so contentedly at peace with the world. But Blake was very busy with his own troubles just then, and had no thought beyond them. It is probable that up to this time the girl's side of the matter had never occurred to him. As he saw it, he was fighting for what he loved best in the world, his freedom and his peace of mind, and it was not until later that he realized how Vittoria's peace of mind might also have been destroyed by that half-hour on the balcony. As men go, he was not a selfish man, and he had proved that many times during his life, as a number of people could have testified; but just now he was in the first throes of a new struggle, and the unexpected strength of the forces he had to combat amazed and bewildered him so that he was by no means himself.

He tried to talk to Miss Fleming, but his preoccupa-

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tion made him inattentive and abrupt—almost surly; and after a few minutes of this the girl, keeping her eyes down that no one might see the hurt in them, turned to the man at her other side and left Blake to his gloomy devices.

It was not a cheerful feast for either of the two, and several times their hostess looked down the table toward them as they sat turned a little from each other, and wondered why they did not get on. She was mildly disappointed, because she had asked Vittoria, whom she did not know at all well, for the especial purpose of interesting Richard Blake. It may be mentioned, in passing, that she was an Englishwoman, and had lived only a few years in New York.

When at last the ladies had gone, Blake moved up at once beside his host, and the two, leaving the other men to their own devices, plunged at once into talk of their projected expedition. But later, in the drawing-room, he had again to face the girl whom he had sat beside. They came together by chance just before she left the house, and the man, it would seem, was moved by some belated scruple to attempt a sort of apology for having failed to pay his respects at Mrs. Dudley's home. He explained that he had been helping his father get off for the South Pacific, but did not explain that that gentleman's preparations for circumnavigating the globe usually consumed less than half a day.

"And now that my father is gone," he said, "I

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have my own troubles to consider. Hamilton and I are off for Asia Minor next month. But I hope to give myself the pleasure of coming to see you very soon, for all that."

The girl contrived to smile politely, and to say that she hoped he would manage to come, but that in any case they were sure to meet from time to time at somebody's house. And with that they parted and went their different ways—Blake morosely to his club; Vittoria, her head very high and a little flush on her cheeks, for she was beginning to be angry with herself, to her cousin's home.

An older and wiser woman would have realized that the man was paying her powers a very high compliment by trying to avoid her, and would have been pleased or not, according as she valued the compliment; but it is the tragedy of youth to be unable in matters of the heart to avail itself of anything like the reasonable common sense or the humor that it applies to the other matters of life.

Youth pays for its privileges.

On the second day following this the two met again in a strange fashion. Blake had awakened on that morning with one of his very rare headaches, and, after his fashion, took it into the open air for cure. He walked up through the Park by the less-frequented paths, and by the time he had passed the obelisk and the museum was free of pain and tingling pleasantly with revitalized blood. He came,

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by chance, to a spot near the upper end of the reservoir, and found a foot-bridge reared above the bridle-path which closely skirts the water there.

A stout old gentleman, with a red face and great bristling white mustache, rode under him at a canter. The hard-blowing hack threw up a shower of sand behind, but forged ahead hardly faster than at a walk—making heavy weather of it, as it were. Indeed, the pair had an effect grotesquely nautical—a bluff-bowed river tug kicking valiantly behind a barge. Blake watched the old gentleman out of sight, and laughed. Then, as he was about to go on his way, he halted, for his eye caught two mounted figures approaching at a quick trot from the south, a man and a young woman, and the woman, it seemed to him, rode extremely well—well enough to watch. The two came near, and they were Vittoria Fleming and a young man called Bellingham—Monty Bellingham to those who knew him.

Blake, above on the foot-bridge, gave an exclamation of surprise and then of distaste, for he cordially disliked Mr. Bellingham and all his kind, and it seemed to him a pity that this young girl should be riding in the Park, or, indeed, having anything to do with the Bellingham sort of person. It was not that the man could be called a monster of sin or of anything else. Most houses were open to him, and certainly he was popular among women. But the better sort of men avoided his company, and a man who is disliked by his fellow-men will bear watching.

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Bellingham represented a type which is familiar in all the great capitals of the world, the well-dressed and well-mannered youth of fairly assured position who can be convicted of breaking no important social laws, but who is trusted by few people—and then only once: his instincts are, as a rule, furtively predatory.

It occurred to Blake that the two might have met by chance rather than by design, and he looked behind to see if Miss Fleming's groom might not be following. But there was no groom to be seen. In point of fact, however, he learned, a long while after this, that the meeting had been accidental, and that Vittoria's groom was waiting at the Park gate.

The two riders passed under the bridge and on to the north, where shortly the path is lost to view. Blake noted, frowning, that the man's horse was very fresh and hardly in hand, and that Vittoria was laughing at his struggles with it. She looked exceedingly well in her close-fitting habit, and rode as she had danced—naturally, without consciousness of effort.

He watched them as they swung out of sight among the trees, and stood a little longer scowling absently at the spot where they had disappeared. Then, as he was turning to go on, he thought he heard the girl's voice again, as if they were coming back by the way they had gone, and, indeed, after a moment the two once more broke into view. Miss Fleming was some little distance ahead, and young Belling-

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ham hung back, fighting with his mount. What followed came very much more swiftly than it can be told. The man must completely have lost his temper and with it his reason, for Blake saw him raise his crop and strike the horse with it—a side blow, across the head. Of course, the animal promptly reared, plunged once, took the bit, and bolted straight forward at a tremendous pace.

Miss Fleming, checking her mare to allow the other to come up, hung diagonally across the path, and Bellingham's maddened beast caromed full into her, swept the lighter animal aside, and was off like a whirlwind.

Blake saw that the girl was unseated and clinging half-way to the ground, saw the mare begin to rise in a first rearing plunge; then he leaped the low parapet of the foot-bridge, hung for an instant by his hands, and dropped into the soft sand of the bridle-path. When he reached the mare's head she was plunging madly, and Vittoria was being dragged by the stirrup. She had had the sense to fold her arms round her head and face, but it seemed impossible that she would not be kicked or trampled. Blake threw his weight upon the bridle, holding close by the bits. The mare was still for a moment, and he saw the girl's foot drop from its hold and saw her roll clear. Then the frightened beast reared again, struck out at him, and broke away. He let it go, and ran to the dusty, huddled heap which lay still in the path.

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She said:

"I'm not hurt! Truly, I'm not hurt!" as he took her in his arms and carried her to the turf by the roadside.

"The sand was soft," she said. "I'm not hurt anywhere—only—shaken—a little." Then she saw his face and knew him, and gave a great sobbing cry which might have been pain or might have been joy. But it had a sound of joy. Blake bent close over her, and his face was very white and hard.

"You're not hurt?" he demanded, in a sharp whisper. It was as if he could not speak aloud. "You're sure you are not hurt—anywhere?" And looking up to him, from where she lay on the green turf, she shook her head in answer.

Immediately after a very violent shock, people almost always say foolish and childish things. Vittoria asked, gravely:

"How did you know I was—going to fall off—just here?" And Blake, without a smile, answered her:

"I thought you might. I thought you might." But after that neither of them seemed to think of anything more to say. The girl, it would seem, had not yet had time to wonder how he came to be there—beyond her insane question as to how he knew where she was going to fall off. She accepted him, without comment, as sent by Heaven. And so, presently, Blake began to brush the dust from her skirt with his hands, and she raised herself a

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little and tried to help him, but sank back again, very white.

The man judged rightly that she was faint, and rose to his feet wondering how he could manage to fetch water to her. But at that moment Providence, in the person of two laborers, passed along the way. One of the men was in the act of restoring a flat, round bottle to his inner pocket, and the two, when they saw the girl, in her dust-smeared habit, lying by the roadside, stopped, and began to stare. Blake went down to them.

"This lady has had a bad fall from her horse," said he, "and I think she is a bit faint. Would you mind lending me your flask?"

The laboring man pulled it out of his pocket and proffered it heartily, saying:

"Sure! Sure! Take all you want, and the lady too." They followed him back across the bridle-path, and stood looking on curiously while he made Vittoria drink a few sips of the very bad whiskey. She made a face over it, and the man to whom the flask belonged laughed, and said:

"Don't you care, miss! It'll do you good, no matter if it ain't champagne." Then, after hanging near for an undecided moment or two, they went on, and the two were left alone.

Vittoria could sit up now without discomfort, and between them they managed to brush her fairly free of sand and dust. But when they had done that, she turned and looked up at him.

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"You couldn't avoid me this time, could you?" she said, and she smiled a little as if she would give the words an effect of lightness. But they were not light.

"Avoid you?" said he. "I don't—"

"You wouldn't come," she said. "You never came, so I had to come to you—in this brazen fashion, too!" She was still smiling, but the man stared mirthless. It was as if she had suddenly pulled aside the shrouding curtains and let him see into a room. He gave an exclamation that was a sort of cry, but the girl could not know what the cry meant, for at that moment there came the scurrying beat of horses' hoofs, and young Bellingham, his face still red and angry from his struggles, rode up, and with him a mounted Park policeman, who led Vittoria's mare.

Bellingham emitted a shout of astonishment at the sight of the other man, and demanded to know how the deuce he happened to be there.

"I was walking near by," said Blake, "and saw Miss Fleming thrown. So I came and brushed her off."

"He came and saved my life," said Vittoria, sharply. "I was being dragged."

Young Bellingham, conscious of his very unheroic rôle, stammered something congratulatory, and began to rail at the brute which had bolted with him—a new horse, it appeared, out of the stable for the first time since its purchase.

Blake turned away from this babble to the girl.

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"You mustn't try to ride back," he said. "You're not fit. You've had a bad shaking up. You must let me send this officer for a cab. Mr. Bellingham can lead your mare to the stable." But she laughed at him, insisting that she could ride for the remainder of the day if necessary without feeling any the worse for it, and Bellingham pressed up to them, staring curiously.

"I don't see but she looks all right," he broke in. "She's not bruised or anything. Why shouldn't she ride?"

"Monty, don't be an ass!" said Blake, angrily. "I tell you Miss Fleming has had a nasty fall, and she's not fit to ride." He asked the officer if he would go for a cab, but Vittoria called the man back and insisted upon being put up on the now subdued and quiet mare. Young Bellingham laughed in Blake's face and swung himself into the saddle. He said, chuckling:

"Foiled—eh, what?" But Blake turned aside as if the other had not been there, and went to where Vittoria sat waiting.

"I'm sorry for trying to interfere," said he. "Doubtless you know best, but I think you'd have been wiser to go home in a cab." The girl shook her head, smiling.

"I'm quite all right," she said. "Not in the least hurt—and I hate being fussed over."

Blake dropped his eyes and stepped back, but she put out her hand to him quickly, saying:

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"Oh, please! please! I didn't mean that—not in the way it sounded. Truly! Please forgive me. I'm not ungrateful." And when he looked up again, she said:

"Will you come to see me—now?" And her face was very grave.

Blake bowed slightly, for he was foolish enough to have been a little hurt by her thoughtless words. He said:

"I shall hope to give myself that pleasure." And then the two rode off down the bridle-path, and he stood looking after them.

The Park policeman nodded his head, *en connaisseur*.

"That there lady can ride," he said. "Look at her now! It must 'a' taken something to spill her off." He slapped his pocket and grinned.

"The gen'leman, he's a good sport too," he confided. "He give me ten dollars for stopping his horse and catching the lady's mare."

"That ten dollars," said Blake, morosely, "was for stopping his own horse. This ten dollars is for the lady's." The Park policeman grinned again, and said:

"Thankee, sir! I'm playing in luck to-day." He swung up to the saddle and rode off, and presently Blake went away, also up toward the foot-bridge, where he had dropped his stick before making that leap into the bridle-path.

He honestly meant to present himself that after-

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noon at Mrs. Dudley's, but shortly before five a message came from an elderly aunt of his—his sole living relation, with the exception of his father—asking him to come to her house immediately upon a matter of importance, so that it was after half-past six when he reached his final destination, and the man at the door said the ladies had gone up to dress. Blake asked if Miss Fleming had suffered any ill effects from her fall, was told that she had not, and so went home.

And on the next morning he had to go out of town for several days.

But when Vittoria, midway through with her dressing, was informed of his call and inquiry, she halted in what she was doing and looked for a long time into the glass before her. Her hands were clinched hard and her lips tight set.

"He did it on purpose!" she said, in an angry whisper. "He came late, when he knew we'd be dressing, on purpose—so that he wouldn't see me. Well . . . that's done with!"

She beat one small hand upon the dressing-table before her.

"That's over and done with! I think we shall manage to get on without Mr. Richard Blake. . . . There seems to be a number of other people in the world."

V

RICHARD BLAKE'S EYES ARE OPENED

YOUNG BLAKE, when in town, was in the habit of dropping in at least once a week, and sometimes oftener, at the Harry Farings. He had known Faring for a good many years—indeed, the two had once made an exploring expedition together in Guatemala—and he had known Faring's beautiful wife in the days of her first marriage, when she was very unhappy indeed. So he was on rather an intimate footing in the house, and liked to go there. He said that the sight of two people as completely happy and as absolutely absorbed in each other as these two were could always restore his confidence in human nature, however badly it might have been damaged.

On this particular day he went rather early, hoping to find Béatrix Faring alone, but to his disappointment he found her talking to that grim and rather terrible old lady whom her friends called Aunt Arabella Crowley, though she was really nobody's aunt at all. Mrs. Crowley gave him a brief nod, and went on with what she had been saying as if he were not in the room. She said to Béatrix Faring:

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"Well, on the whole, I dare say it's a good thing she is going back. Heaven knows what she might not do next. Nothing would astonish me." The old lady paused there, but, after the pause, she said:

"You didn't know her mother, of course. I did. This girl is astonishingly like her—something odd about them both—the foreign blood, doubtless."

Mrs. Faring turned to Blake and explained.

"We were talking about Catharine Dudley's cousin," she said—"the new beauty, Vittoria Fleming. Have you met her? Ah, yes, of course you have. Of course! I remember. She has been here this afternoon. She left not ten minutes before you came in."

Blake said, oh yes, he had met Miss Fleming, and just then Aunt Arabella Crowley turned to him with a sudden exclamation. She said:

"Oh! You are Richard Blake, are you not? I only half heard the name. Richard Blake! Bless my soul, now, that's very odd!" She stared at the young man with an intensity of gaze that seemed to have something like excitement in it, and once more, after a little, she said, God bless her soul, it was very odd. Blake wondered vaguely what was odd; but as Mrs. Crowley seemed disinclined to explain, and only stared at him in that intimidating fashion, he merely said, "Yes," and Béatrix Faring came to his rescue with a question as to his recent whereabouts.

Aunt Arabella took her departure shortly after

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that. She had said very little more, and seemed thoughtful and silent beyond her wont. At the door, which Blake opened for her, she faced him abruptly, and said, in her drill-sergeant's tone:

"Come and see me, if you'd care to. I live in Gramercy Park." She went away while he was thanking her, and he turned back across the room to his hostess. They both laughed a little, and Blake said:

"What a dreadful old woman!"

"You seem to have won her heart in some mysterious fashion," Béatrix Faring said. "Aunt Arabella very seldom asks young men to call on her. Go and see her, if you can. She's really a very sweet old soul among her friends. The Carterets adore her, you know, and so do Harry and I. Will you have some tea, or do you want what Harry calls a 'real one'? Ring, if it's the latter."

Blake said he would have tea if he might, and sat down near by.

"It's rather odd," he said, "your happening to speak of Miss Fleming, and her having been here to-day. I was meaning to go on presently to the Dudley's. I've been trying to call there for a long time, but something always got in the way."

Mrs. Faring shook her head.

"Well, you're too late now. She's by this time on a train bound for Connecticut. She and Catharine popped in here for just a moment on their way to the station. Vittoria is going back home, and I

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expect—" Mrs. Faring stopped short in the middle of her sentence, because she became aware that the man before her was regarding her with a curiously blank stare, and she even thought that he had turned pale, though men seldom perform that feat. She said, quickly:

"What is it? What is the matter with you?" And at the change in her tone Richard Blake recovered himself with a start, as people do who have been absent in mind.

"Are you unwell?" Béatrix Faring persisted. "I never saw you look like that before. You frightened me."

The man took a long breath, and after it laughed a little, but it was not a very mirthful laugh. He seemed to hesitate a long while before speaking, and his hostess made no attempt to help him out—only waited in silence. But at last he said:

"You're about the only human being, Béatrix, that I ever tell things to, or look to for—well, understanding. I'm afraid that girl's return home—I'm afraid, you know, it's rather a facer for me."

Mrs. Faring gave a low exclamation of surprise, and, after a moment, she said:

"I didn't know. I never knew."

"Well, I didn't know, either," said he.—"Yes, I did! I take that back. That's not true. I knew from the very beginning, but I wouldn't confess it even to myself. I fought it with all the strength I had. I wanted to remain free. To fall in love was

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the very last thing in the world I had expected or wished to do. I can't explain to you how I've always prized my freedom. It's hard for women to understand a feeling like that. Well, I knew in the very beginning that if I wanted to keep my head I'd have to stop away from Vittoria Fleming, and so I did it by every possible means, civil or rude. I avoided her as if she'd been a disease. I think I've seen her in all just three times—once at a ball, once at dinner, and once riding in the Park. But those three times seem to have been three too many. . . . I don't know what I've been expecting to come of it—for I meant to call there to-day. It was a promise—I think I haven't expected anything at all. Now that she's gone—I know, at last. Now I know."

He leaned forward in his chair, staring at the Sehna rug at his feet, and his hands clasped and unclasped slowly between his knees. A single vertical vein in the middle of his forehead began to stand out prominently, as if it were congested. The woman looked across at him with compassion, because she was fond of him, and it hurt her to see him hurt.

"Have you any reason," she began, gently—"any ground for thinking that she—Vittoria—that she cares, too? Have you any reason for believing that?"

Blake shook his head without looking up, and said:

"No! Certainly not!" But then, as once before, he caught himself up, saying:

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"I don't know. Perhaps that is not quite true. I have no definite reason. That's certain, but—it's a matter of feeling—fancy. I think—I did think, perhaps. Well, I may have thought very foolish things, and doubtless I was wrong. I have no real and definite reason for believing that Vittoria Fleming ever cared a hang for me. She has a manner that is more direct, more intimate, perhaps, than girls usually have. Doubtless she has it for every one she meets. . . . And still—" he said, looking down once more upon the rug at his feet. "And still— Well, that's over! That's over and done with!" Oddly enough, he used the very words Vittoria had used ten days before. But Mrs. Far-
ing made an exclamation of protest.

"Nonsense! Of course it's not over or done with. Have you no more enterprise or courage than that? Do you mean to say that you're going to let a distance of seventy-five miles separate you forever from a girl you love—especially when you think she cares back? It's incredible."

"Under ordinary circumstances," said he, "it would be absurd—incredible, as you say, but I feel rather oddly about it, rather fatalistic. It sounds over-fanciful, perhaps, and Heaven knows I'm not a fanciful man, but I think I was going there to-day rather as one makes a throw at dice. I had a feeling that to-day the whole thing was to decide itself, one way or the other. That's outright fatalism, isn't it? But that's how I felt. Well, you see, she has de-

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cided it herself—or Fate has, or something. She has gone beyond my reach.”

Mrs. Faring frowned across at him in high disapproval.

“You talk like a silly girl,” said she, “and I’m ashamed of you. If being in love has turned you into this sort of person, I’m glad you were never in love before. ‘Fate,’ indeed! That’s nonsense.”

Blake did not answer, only smiled and shook his head, and, in the little pause that followed, Béatrix Faring may have had time to reflect how large a part Fate, or something very like it, had played in her own romantic life, for the frown went away from her brows, and when she spoke again her voice was gentler. She said:

“I don’t mean to be violent, but if you love that beautiful girl I should hate to see you lose her unnecessarily.”

“Well,” he pointed out, “I can’t reasonably follow her to a country-house where she lives alone with a sour and morose father, can I? I’m on no such footing with her as that. Indeed, I’m, properly speaking, on no footing at all, for I have never called at the Dudleys. I’ve never even made a first call. For all I know, Miss Fleming may have forgotten my very existence. Don’t you see?”

“Yes,” said Béatrix Faring, thoughtfully. “Yes, I see. Of course.” She gave a sudden laugh of pure astonishment, and Blake stared at her.

“It is the most extraordinary thing!” she cried.

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"The most incredible thing! I believe you're right, after all, about trusting in Fate. Only Fate is working for you, and not, as you thought, against. I have only this very moment thought of something that I meant to tell you when you first came. It was in my mind when Aunt Arabella was here—indeed, she and I were discussing it; but then we began to talk about Vittoria, and I forgot. Harry has taken for the summer—only we're going abroad in July—a big old house in Connecticut that the Lees own; those Arthur Lees, you know. It's a country-house that has been in the Lee family for ages. Harry wants to be very, very quiet, for two months to finish a long, dull monograph on that South American mountain he climbed last year. He has promised it to some society, and they're to give him a lot of letters to put after his name. He didn't know where to go to do it, and the Lees said, why not go to this place of theirs? They haven't lived in it for years, but it has been kept in good condition by the caretakers. Well, here's the point. This house is only a few miles—two or three, I think—from the Fleming place. Vittoria and I talked about it only the other day, and she seemed to be immensely pleased at the prospect of some neighbors to play with. It's very dull for the poor child. Do you see? You're to visit us there, and have all the opportunity you want for stalking the lady. What could be better?"

"Nothing could be better," said Blake. "It's ideal. The only trouble with it is that I can't come.

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I'm off in a fortnight, or thereabouts, for Armenia. Harrison Forbes and Willie Strong and two or three others are going. I can't very well withdraw at this late hour."

Nevertheless, Mrs. Faring saw that his cheeks were flushed, and that there was a light of excitement in the eyes that he turned away from hers. Protests clamored upon the tip of her tongue, incredulous scorn at the man's lack of enterprise, but she was wise, and checked herself before she had spoken. She was shrewdly aware that within himself arguments more potent than any she could voice were at work and would go on working.

And, besides, although, like most very happily married women, she was by instinct a matchmaker, she did not wish to act too boldly here. Each of them had spoken of Fate as having a hand in the relations of Richard Blake and Vittoria Fleming, but there are good fates and evil ones. Mrs. Faring reflected upon that, and held her tongue. She said only:

"I'll leave it with you to think over. My invitation holds good for any time or for all the time that we may be in Connecticut. Come to us if you want to. We shall go down, I think, in a week or ten days. Harry is impatient to be at his work."

Blake shook his head once more with a little smile, but he did not speak, and there came between the two a brief silence. It was Mrs. Faring who broke it at last. She had really determined to leave the

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matter, in so far as it involved a decision, entirely in Blake's hands, but she was too womanlike to be able to resist a small, mischievous prod of the goad. She said, reflectively:

"I wonder just how many young men in New York will put *crêpe* on their hats to-morrow, when they learn that Vittoria has gone home. I dare say there'll be rather a regiment of them."

Blake looked up with a not very joyous "Oh!" and she laughed a little, inwardly, saying:

"Oh, she has had no lack of—'suitors,' as Jimmy Rogers calls them. You may be sure of that. Jimmy Rogers himself was among the first—that will have been long before you met her; but then he is always breaking his heart about somebody, so he doesn't count. The poor little Sailes boy counts, though, and Chalmers le Clair, and your friend, Harrison Forbes, and the Brooks twins. They all wanted to die for her—a long procession of them. And a lot of those horrid older men! It must have given poor Catharine Dudley some sleepless nights, I should think."

Blake said "Oh!" again rather blankly, for this was all news to him, though it was far from surprising news. He reflected, unhappily, that he really knew almost nothing of Vittoria's social career during the season just ended, for he had been going out very little altogether, and then seldom in the *débutante* class.

"Oh, I've no doubt," he said, "that Miss Fleming was a great success. She'd be a success anywhere,

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I'm sure. She is very beautiful and very charming. And she's—different, somehow."

"Yes," said his hostess, nodding slowly, as if she were giving careful thought to what he had said. "Yes, she's very different. She's not much like the other girls here. I think they felt that, and—perhaps made it a little hard for her: some of them, that is; not all, by any means. Doubtless jealousy had a great deal to do with it, and then they felt her to be in a way an outsider, a stranger. It is hard, of course, to have a—what do you call it?—a 'dark horse' come in and win the race, you know. And Vittoria won the race easily, this year. She was the hit of the season. . . . Yes, she's different. It's a matter of temperament. I don't pretend to understand her altogether, but I've grown fonder of her in these few months than of any girl I ever knew. She has—so much to give, and she gives it so splendidly! . . . She demands a good deal, too, of course. You'll have seen that—I don't mean from her friends, but of the world, of life. She's so tragically eager for happiness that she often frightens me—too eager. Think how badly she might let life hurt her. I suppose it all comes from having lived alone, in a sort of tomb, for so very long."

"I think it comes from something deeper than that," Blake said. "I think it comes from inside. It's temperamental." And Mrs. Faring said:

"Yes, I dare say you're right." She broke into a sudden laugh.

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"Poor Catharine Dudley! The child has been a handful for her! Always in scrapes of some kind, and for the past ten days—Heaven knows what got into her!—she has behaved like a lunatic at large. Aunt Arabella and I were discussing some of her goings-on before you arrived to-day. Then, too, Monty Bellingham has been trailing her about, and that must have worried Catharine Dudley."

"Monty Bellingham is a rotten little bounder!" said Blake, angrily. "I'm not sure one couldn't go further and say that he's a cad. Mrs. Dudley must have been insane to let that girl see him."

"I don't think Catharine had much to do with it," Béatrix Faring said. "I fancy Vittoria managed that, on her own. And, after all, I suppose he is amusing—at least, Vittoria says he is."

She thought Blake had been sufficiently harassed by this time, and so changed the subject as deftly as she could, but the man reverted to it once or twice, and was quite plainly in a very ill-humor. When he found that his hostess was determined to talk no more about Vittoria Fleming, he got up to take his leave, but, half-way out of the room, turned back with a new thought. He said:

"What do you suppose old Mrs. Crowley meant by going into that fit of astonishment over my name? She'd been talking to you about Miss Fleming, then it suddenly occurred to her who I was. She seemed to connect the two of us in some fashion. She said it was very odd, and went away quite excited."

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Béatrix Faring shook her head.

"I don't know," said she. "I noticed that, too, and meant to speak to you of it. What was she saying just before? Oh! something about Vittoria's mother. Well, you never knew Vittoria's mother, did you?"

"Never even heard of her," said he. And Mrs. Faring said:

"No, of course not. She must have died when the girl was a baby. I can't think what Aunt Arabella meant, but I'm sure that it had something to do with Vittoria's mother."

VI

INTRODUCING MESSRS. TEMPLE AND FLEMING

MR. BEAUMONT TEMPLE has sometimes been called "the novelist of the chosen few," and there can be no doubt that the solid and profound volumes which he gives to the world, one each second year, are read by the chosen few if they are read by anybody. The larger public which demands amusement in its fiction passes them respectfully by, and so it is a very good thing that Mr. Temple does not depend upon the practice of his art for a livelihood. He was, at the time with which this veracious chronicle has to do, three or four and forty, and he did not look at all as one might imagine the "novelist of the chosen few" to look. He was a square, ruddy man, with close-cut yellow hair which was beginning to be sparse, with blue eyes which twinkled upon occasion, and with a waist-line which only constant and indefatigable effort was able to keep within proper limits. This is not at all to say that he was stout, for he was not; but stoutness lay in wait for his old age, and Temple was resentfully aware of it.

He had a country-house in Connecticut not far

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from Mickleford and within two miles of Standish, the Fleming place. He had lived there more or less constantly for twenty years, but his youth and early manhood had been passed abroad, and it was a stormy and romantic youth of which the "chosen few" knew nothing whatever. There was the white scar of a sabre cut low down on one of Mr. Temple's cheeks, and one or two people knew that the man bore other scars also from this early period; but they were inner scars, and he never showed them. He never even suggested their existence, for he was the cheerfulest of all men, with wholesome out-of-door tastes. He shot and fished in the proper seasons, and he rode regularly each day (with his thoughts upon that dangerous waist-line), he played tennis with Vittoria Fleming (and was invariably beaten), and occasionally he accepted an invitation to Westchester or to Long Island for a day's hunting. In a general summing up, however, his two chief interests might be said to be the practice of his profession and Miss Vittoria Fleming.

When that young lady reached Mickleford on her homeward journey she found a trap ready to take her the mile-and-a-bit from the village to Standish, and, greatly to her surprise, she found Beaumont Temple also. He had come in the trap, but he was in riding-clothes, and she guessed rightly that he had ridden over to Standish from his own place and so had been sent to the station by her father.

The girl's first thought when she saw him standing

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there on the platform was that her father was ill, and that Temple had come to break the news to her. But Temple laughed at the idea.

"Pender's right as a trivet," he said. "Nothing wrong with him but an ingrowing bad disposition. I happened to be at Standish, and he asked me if I'd like to come and meet your train. In consequence, behold me!" He took her two slim hands in his big ones and pumped them up and down, beaming upon her in the absurd elder-brother fashion that he chose at times to assume.

"Oh, Miss Vittoria Fleming," he mourned, dolorously, "you certainly have grown up! I knew you would. I looked forward to it, but—I take it unfriendly of you. You've grown up, and now we can't play any more."

"Don't be silly, Beau!" the girl cried. "I've done nothing of the sort. Are we going to stand here holding hands all the afternoon? The people in the car windows enjoy it, and so do I, but let's be going."

Temple sighed profoundly, put her into the waiting trap, gave the necessary orders about her luggage, and climbed to the seat beside her. She asked him once more rather anxiously about her father, as they set off.

"His last letter to me sounded very unlike him," she said—"as if he were ill or worried. You're quite sure, Beau, that nothing's wrong?"

"I'm sure of nothing," said the man, "except that I'm uncommon glad to see the sun and moon and

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stars back at Standish once more. But, as to Pender, I think he's much as usual. Surely you didn't expect him to come to the station to meet you!"

On the surface of it there seems nothing astonishing in a father taking the trouble to go a mile over good roads to meet his returning daughter after a separation of five months, but Vittoria laughed, as at an absurdity.

"Well, no," she admitted. "No, hardly that."

"That wouldn't be in the least playing up to Pender's pose," said Temple. He did not speak offensively, but as if in a sort of gentle and tolerant mockery of a very old friend.

"Pender must be the 'heavy' old man, with a strong touch of eccentricity, or he won't play. He'll take his doll and go home. I've got on with him all these long years only by accepting him in his rôle without question and without mirth. And for that matter, my dear, so have you."

The girl laughed in spite of herself, but she put her hand on the man's arm as if to check him.

"Don't, Beau!" she said. "Really you mustn't. I know you're the one person in the world who's allowed to say anything about anybody, but you mustn't abuse poor father. He doesn't pose at all."

"Oh, doesn't he, though?" cried Temple. "He has posed so long that he wouldn't recognize himself—the real self—if the two should meet in the street. I'm not abusing him, angel child. I'm admiring him. He's a very finished artist."

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"Do you mean to say," she demanded, "that father is a hypocrite? Do you mean to say that my mother's death didn't absolutely crush him and make him—what he has always been since then?" The man's face became grave.

"Well, no," said he. "No. I don't go as far as that. Without doubt it broke him terribly. But—well, you know I've never forgiven him for caging you up here all your life—though, Heaven knows, I've been the gainer by it. If Pender hadn't coddled his grief and admired himself in it so profoundly you might have been having a much better time. He has no occupation to bother with. Why hasn't he been taking you about the world all these twenty years, and showing you beautiful things and having you meet beautiful people? That's what I can't forgive him."

The girl turned and looked curiously into Temple's face; for he had been speaking in earnest, and with more feeling than she had almost ever heard from him.

"Why, Beau dear!" she said, "I didn't know you'd ever thought of that. I never did myself. Father is—well, he's father. It never occurred to me that he could do that."

"It never occurred to him, either," said Temple, shortly. But again she laid her hand on his arm.

"So serious!" she mocked. "And on my very return, too! Let's don't blackguard father any more. Really, you know, I think he's very fond of me—in

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his undemonstrative fashion." And the man raised his eyebrows slightly.

"So you've discovered that, have you?" said he. "It's a wonder, for Pender hides it well. I'll tell you a secret. He *is* fond of you. But he'd almost rather die than admit it. Ah well! we'll drop Pender. I expect I'm rather a brute to bedevil him to your very face, but I'm in a bad humor to-day. . . . Have you had a good time these five months?"

"Beautiful, Beau!" she cried. "Oh, beautiful! They were all so nice to me, all those lovely people, my cousin and all the rest! I've hardly slept for months. I didn't know there was so much fun in the world—balls and dinner-parties and the opera. Oh, Beau dear, *the opera!* Why did you never tell me how wonderful it is? And the other girls who came out this year, they were nice, too—some of them adorable; but do you know—somehow—I don't think I like girls as well as other people. Some of them were—well, just the least bit catty, you know. I think I like men better."

She said that with the air of one who makes a profound discovery of great importance, and Temple roared with laughter. But the girl swept on. "And, Beau, fancy! I've found something that I've been wanting so long—so long!"

Temple looked at her sharply.

"What?" he asked, in a quick tone.

"A mother, Beau," said she. "*My mother!* My own beautiful mother! Mrs. Dudley told me about

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her. How sweet and lovely she was. Ah, you don't know how I've always wanted my mother!"

Temple bent his head.

"She was all that is beautiful and kind and sweet!" said he. "I have often wished that I might talk to you about her, but your father forbade it."

"He must have loved her very, very dearly," said Vittoria, in a low voice. And, after a bit, the man said:

"Yes, he did—in his way."

They came to the tall gates of Standish, and turned into the long drive which, between rows of lilac and laburnum, wound up to the house on the hill.

"I wonder if father will be looking out for me?" Vittoria asked.

"He will," said the man, "secretly, between half-opened shutters; but when you reach the house you will find him, as usual, in his study, and he will be somewhat surprised and a little annoyed at seeing you. He'll give you a gloomy sketch of a kiss on one ear, and the household of Standish will have resumed its ancient calm. I'm going to put Pender in a book. He's unique."

Temple was in part right, but only in part. Certainly, as the trap swung round the final curve of the driveway, a shutter in the front of the house clicked with some distinctness. Certainly, also, Fleming was not at the door to welcome his daughter, and Vittoria, after greeting the ancient butler who took her down from the trap, was shown to her father's

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study, a great square room, book-lined and full of shadows, looking to the north, so that it never had the genial sun. Pender Fleming awaited her there. He was not, as usual, seated in his big desk-chair, bent darkly over a book. He stood in the middle of the room leaning against the table there, a stout man with a great pallid face and a slow, unwieldy body. He had a very high and hairless brow, and his eyes, like his face, were pale, but, unlike most pale eyes, they were deep-set, and had always a haggard and cavernous look, as if the man slept ill. His lower lip protruded a little, and when he was displeased or was immersed in gloomy thought he out-thrust it still more. It was an unprepossessing habit, but then he was an unprepossessing man. Yellowish-white hair grew at the back and sides of his head, and he wore a sparse and straggling whisker in the early Victorian style.

Vittoria halted just inside the door, for she was never quite at ease with her father, and she was a little embarrassed now, not knowing how to approach him. He had seldom encouraged demonstrations of affection. So, for a moment, the two paused facing each other, and the man who wrote novels stood apart and watched with an alert interest that had something professional about it.

He had expressed himself regarding this man to the man's daughter with more freedom than he had intended, albeit he had maintained throughout a tone of half banter, but the words he had used had but

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palely expressed his real feeling in the matter. He distrusted and despised Pender Fleming, and yet he saw rather a great deal of him, partly because the man really interested him more than almost any one he had ever known, and partly for another reason not unconnected with Vittoria.

Fleming's pale face began to work strangely. He wetted his lips, and it seemed that he was trying to speak, but no sound came. After a moment he raised one hand in an odd, stiff gesture, and the hand wavered out toward the girl, who stood waiting. At last he said:

"Come—child!" and Vittoria ran to him, and took his face between her hands and kissed him on both cheeks.

The man who stood apart watched with keen interest, and he saw Pender Fleming's face twist again above the girl's head, and a single tear gleam and drop. He saw the man's arms rise again stiffly, and his hands make as if they would stroke the girl's hair, but drop again as if they did not know how. And Temple nodded to himself with an appearance of satisfaction. Indeed, in a fashion, he was satisfied, or at least his judgment was, for he had long had a theory that the grim and silent and bitter old man cherished under his forbidding exterior a secret passion of tenderness, a great love—or as great a love as he was capable of—for this young girl, who recalled to him the joy and the anguish, the splendor and the agony, of a deep-buried past.

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Fleming released his daughter and moved a step back from her, as if he feared that she might feel tempted to renew her caress. He said:

"There! There! I am glad you're at home again, child." And something doubtless meant for a smile appeared for a brief instant upon the vast pallidity of his still face.

Vittoria turned with a little laugh to the other man.

"You see, father *was* glad to see me!" she said, and she spoke a bit nervously, as if half afraid of her little jest.

"Yes," said Temple. "Yes. But he's ashamed of it already. He'll see that it never occurs again." The novelist was a privileged person in that house. He spoke as he chose, and his speeches were sometimes appalling; but on this occasion he would seem to have flicked his host unexpectedly on the raw, for Pender Fleming swung toward him, lowering savagely.

"In God's name!" he cried, "will you grant me no human attributes whatever?"

"Not many," said the younger man, without a smile. And, after a further moment of that dark scowl, Fleming dropped his eyes.

"You're spoiled, Beau," said he. "You have no manners. Eh, well, we mustn't quarrel, we two. Get along home and change! I want you to come back for dinner. We must celebrate the child's home-coming in some fashion."

"Thank you," said Temple. "I'll come gladly.

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We shall be gay. My faith, we shall be feverish! Two dull old men and one beautiful but depressed young lady. Gad! Donna Vittoria will run away back to civilization under cover of the night."

At that name Pender Fleming gave a sort of low cry and turned his back, moving away toward the window. Even the man who had spoken frowned and compressed his lips. And, after a moment of hesitation, he said, hastily:

"Right, then! I shall be back at eight," and went out of the room.

Vittoria followed him to the side porch, and stood beside him there while his horse was being brought round.

"How did you happen to call me that, Beau?" she asked.

"It was a slip," said he, frowning still. "It was a slip. I'm sorry. I—sometimes think of you so. It was that, I expect."

"Do you think of me so, Beau?" she said, gently. And the man said:

"Yes—yes!" in an absent tone. "You've a right to it," he said. "You're a sort of princess, I suppose—at least, your house was a princely house."

"I know," said she. "Mrs. Dudley told me, but I'd almost forgotten. I've had—so many things to think of."

Temple glanced down at her sharply, but she was looking away across the hills, and did not seem disposed to explain further about the things of which

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she had to think. And after a moment he moved toward the steps, saying:

“Here’s my nag, and I must be off. I shall see you later, of course. If your trunks have arrived, wear your newest and smartest frock for my sake. Do you realize that I have never seen you in fine feathers? You’re tolerably good looking, I take it, when you’re well got up.”

VII

MR. TEMPLE BECOMES YOUNG AGAIN

VITTORIA watched Temple ride away down the drive, and, after he had disappeared from sight, turned back into the house. She would have liked to go once more to her father's study, and sit down on the edge of his great writing-table and tell him what a wonderful time she had had in New York. She was well aware that that was what most girls would do under the circumstances as a natural matter of course, for she had, within the past few months, learned a good deal about how normal households are conducted—and some of what she had learned had surprised her, and had left her with a little, dull, jealous ache at her heart because her life had been so very different. That was what any of her new friends in town would do, she said, when returned from a long absence, and she wondered if she dared do it herself. She took a few steps down the hall toward her father's door, and suddenly found that she could not go on. The man had held her aloof from him too long. She was tongue-tied and embarrassed in his presence.

So she turned away, and went up the stairs to her

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own chamber. It was a big square room, looking both to the south and to the west through long French windows that opened to the floor, and had little balconies outside each one. The big pieces of furniture, bed, dressing-table, high-boy, and such, were of heavy old mahogany, but Vittoria had had the chairs and couches covered with bright English chintz, and had had the walls hung with a quaint paper which matched the chintz almost perfectly. So it was a very comfortable room indeed, spacious and light and full of cheery color—full also of fresh outdoor air, but with a hint of the scent of dried lavender. And nobody could ask for an atmosphere sweeter or more grateful than that.

The girl entered with the little glad smile of one home-coming to dear and familiar things. She went here and there about the chamber, touching the books on the tables, moving the chairs an unnecessary half-inch each—as, for some mysterious reason, women always do—and then she crossed to one of the open windows and stepped out upon the little balcony beyond. She was at the front of the house, here, looking southward, and the winding double sweep of the drive curved away below her to the gates far down toward the foot of the hill. Beyond, she could see the village road and the village itself, with a brown haze of smoke hanging over it veil-like in the still sunset air. Beyond the village were low hills, and, beyond those, hills again, smoky blue against the horizon. To the left from Standish another road

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mounted and sank over rolling ground, and, midway of it, she could see Beaumont Temple jogging along between the hedge-rows, homeward bound. She waved her hand at him again, but the man's back was turned, and, besides, he was too far away to have seen.

Vittoria spoke aloud, staring out across the pleasant hills. She said, rather mechanically:

"It's good to be at home again and rest. At least—I suppose I'm glad. I wonder?" She gave the matter a moment's vague thought, and then all at once her cheeks flushed and she gripped her hands beside her.

"Yes, I am glad!" she cried out. "I am glad to be back here and away from it all." She remembered her enthusiastic words to Beaumont Temple on the way from the village, and smiled over them a little bitterly, for they had been but partly true. The face of the man who had made them false came before her, as always when she was alone, and she made a little sound in her throat which was not a sob, but something near to it.

She was still hurt and angry over the man's calm neglect of her, but she pretended to herself that she was much more angry than hurt, and most of the time she believed it. She often had little arguments with herself about the matter, and, since she could not be blind to the fact that she thought about him a great deal of the time, she persuaded herself that this was because he was the only man who had ever been

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really rude to her. His conduct stood out very conspicuously from the conduct of all the other young or old men whom she had met in New York, and that was why, she told herself, he so often appeared in her thoughts. She argued this very earnestly and with a fine appearance of frankness, and after it she added that, after all, Mr. Blake had saved her life, and therefore she must be grateful to him forever.

Of those last ten days in town, with their furious attempt to drown thought in excessive gayety, she tried not to think at all. They remained a sort of nightmare.

"I'm glad to be back!" she said again, and she really meant it, for home and the quiet life thereof at least spelled sanctuary—asylum.

Her maid, a middle-aged Scots woman whom she had not taken with her to New York, spoke from the room behind, to say that the men were bringing the trunks up, and Vittoria turned back to see them put in place.

"I must get out something pretty for Beau to see me in," she said.

But when, two hours later, Temple entered the drawing-room at Standish, unannounced, he stopped short in the doorway with a soundless cry of amazement and pleasure. The girl was standing beside a table in the centre of the room, and from above her head the mellow light of many candles—they burned candles at Standish—fell over her. She

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had chosen an evening frock of pink satin, very simple, unrelieved by any other color, its long, close-fitting lines unbroken by adornment. And she was without jewels. She had picked up a book from the table, and, holding it in one hand, was reading from it by the light of the candles.

Temple, hidden in the shadow of the doorway, watched in silence. In his forty and more years he had been in many countries and had known many beautiful women, but, looking back at this moment, he could not remember that he had ever known or even seen one whose beauty smote him with such a swift shock of surprise and delight as did the sudden sight of Vittoria Fleming in her pink satin under the candle-light. Of course, he had long been aware that she was far more than pretty, but he had been used to seeing her in a short corduroy skirt or a riding-habit, or at best in a very simple and unpretentious evening frock at dinner, with her black hair in a knot at the back of her neck.

There is a great gulf between such primitive simplicity and the astonishingly perfect picture which can be produced by the efforts of a skilful modiste and lessons in expert hair-dressing—especially when a girl has the face and hair and figure of Vittoria Fleming.

She was even more beautiful than her mother had been, Temple said to himself, for she carried her splendor with a franker and—not in the disagreeable sense—a bolder air. Bianca Fleming had shrunk

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a little from the world. Oddly enough, splendor was the word that first came to him, as it had come to Richard Blake. "An unspeakable splendor of vitality," he put it, and, like the other man, he was suddenly afraid for the girl.

But just then Vittoria looked up and saw him, and he went down the room to join her. She stroked the pink satin with a deprecatory hand.

"It was the best I had," said she. "Some of the trunks haven't come yet." But the man shook his head over her, saying:

"Don't pretend! You know there is nothing so good in any of the other trunks—or in the world." And she gave a little pleased laugh like a child whose doll has been praised.

"Do you like it, Beau?" she asked. "Truly? Then I'm very glad. Because I've always suspected you of knowing a lot about clothes, and I've always been such a frump! Oh, Beau, dear, it *is* nice to have pretty things! I adore them.

"And it's nice too," she said, calmly, "to be able to wear things with simple lines instead of being hung round like a Christmas tree, isn't it?"

"It is," said Temple, and he was entirely unable to tell whether her speech arose from sheer naïveté or from a serene consciousness of her own perfection.

Then Pender Fleming came into the room, and presently they went out to dinner.

Temple's ironical forecast of that celebration was accurately borne out by fact—save, perhaps, in the

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matter of his reference to himself as one of the "two dull old men." He was neither old nor dull. Certainly the affair was far from gay. Fleming seemed distrait almost beyond his wont—which is putting it strongly. He had halted for a long moment when he came into the drawing-room and saw his daughter there, and had stared at her blankly, much as Temple did, but he made no remark upon her appearance until they were at table, when he looked at her again with veiled eyes, and said:

"You seem to have grown up." And after a moment, he said:

"You seem to have done it rather suddenly. I must be getting old."

He had brought out, in honor of the occasion, one of his few remaining bottles of a certain very old Madeira.

"As an especial treat to you, my dear Vittoria," Temple mocked, "in view of the well-known fact that no young women, and few old ones, know Madeira from sherry—or from Chambertin, for that matter."

They drank to her return and to her health and happiness, and Vittoria sat the while with bright eyes and a little, grateful smile.

But as the dinner progressed a strange and grotesque gayety seemed to fall upon old Pender Fleming. It could not have been the wine, for he habitually drank a great deal more than he was drinking at this time. Neither of the other two at the table knew

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what was stirring him, and it is possible that Pender himself did not know, but whatever the cause may have been it spurred him on to strange and discordant laughter over nothing at all—a laughter which was like the cawing of crows in a field—and it moved him to the fashioning of uncouth and elephantine jokes which he seemed to think very funny indeed, and at which the other two politely smiled between exchanged glances of astonishment and alarm.

“You surpass yourself to-night, Pender,” said Beaumont Temple, after one of these dire performances. “I have known you on occasion to be appreciative of my sparkling humor, but I didn’t know that you set up for a wag yourself. Pender, you’re a gay old dog, that you are!”

“I’m pleased over my daughter’s return,” said his host, cocking an eye that shone with unprecedented light.

“Look at her, Beau!” He struck his heavy hand upon the table. “She’s turned out a mighty handsome woman, by God, sir! . . . I drink to you again, my dear.”

Vittoria laughed, and colored a little. She was very much amused, but also a little frightened, for she had never before known her father to be in this mood, and it alarmed her.

“A mighty handsome woman!” he said again, weightily. “And I never knew. I never saw it coming. I thought she was a child till you took a hand, Beau, and made me send her to New York.”

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Temple frowned, and the girl turned upon him a look of swift astonishment, for she had never known that she owed her acceptance of Catharine Dudley's invitation to him.

"And I suppose," grumbled the elder man—"I suppose the next thing will be marriage. Well—" He looked from his daughter to Beaumont Temple and back again with what he doubtless considered a roguish wink, and shook his head playfully.

"Well, you two make a devilish fine pair!" he said. "Eh?"

Temple frowned again, saying, under his breath:

"Pender! Pender!" And he shot a quick side-look of annoyance toward the girl. But Vittoria must have had herself very well in hand just then, for, though she usually blushed at small excuse, her cheeks at this moment bore no heightened color.

"I take it you haven't been losing your heart in New York," said Pender Fleming, suddenly, in a harsh voice. "You haven't been falling in love with anybody there?" The girl looked up at him and laughed.

"If I had," she said, "I certainly shouldn't confess it to you and Beau. I'm far cleverer than that. I'm afraid you don't know much about girls, father."

The man gave a sort of inarticulate grunt and seemed to lose interest in the subject, for he sank back in his chair with bent head and lowered eyes, and began absently to finger the wine-glass before him, frowning down upon it as if he were lost in thought

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—which was his normal bearing when at table, or, for that matter, anywhere else.

Then presently Vittoria rose, for the meal was at an end, and left the two men together. She went to the drawing-room and sipped her coffee there, but presently moved out through one of the open windows to the paved terrace which hung balcony-like above a sharp dip of hillside beneath. And she went to the outer wall of the terrace, and stood, with her back to the house, looking over the tree-tops and across the broad valley beyond.

It was a warm, sweet night, a summer night come before its time, with summer odors of early roses from the gardens near, and a soft summer wind and summer stars above.

Steps sounded upon the brick flagging behind her, and Beaumont Temple came where she was beside the low wall.

“You didn’t stay long,” she said, turning to him. And he shook his head.

“No. Long enough, though. Pender has one of his silent moods. The spasm of coltishness would seem to have been too much for him. I don’t wonder.”

Vittoria laughed a little.

“I was almost frightened,” she confessed. “He almost frightened me—it was very strange.” She turned about once more, and lifted her face to the warm night wind.

“What a night, Beau!” she said, softly. “What a heavenly night!”

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The man stirred beside her.

"Yes—yes!" he said, absently, after a little. And after another pause he said:

"Vittoria . . . Pender has . . . rather taken the words out of my mouth. He has spoiled my game by—by interfering. But . . . and I know I'm a very dull old party, but it appears that dull old parties can feel astonishingly like youngsters on occasion. Astonishingly! Do you think . . . ? It's nothing sudden with me, you know. I've felt it coming on for a long time, and it came hard, my dear."

The girl did not stir or speak, and after a moment he said:

"Vittoria, Pender may have come closer than he knew when he asked you that question at dinner. You passed it off then. Will you answer it now? It's rather important. Is there any one in New York, Vittoria, or shall I go on?"

Vittoria stared up at him through the half-gloom, and she did not in the least understand what he was about. If Temple had been another younger man—one of the many in New York—she would have thought that he was on the point of proposing to her, but of course that was out of the question with Beau Temple. She imagined that he must be questioning her in his rôle of general adviser and father confessor, which was an old rôle with him, only usually he was more direct about it.

"Do you mean," she asked—"do you mean, is

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there any one in New York whom I—who has a claim upon me?”

Temple said:

“Yes, that is what I mean.” And then she said, with an odd, an almost angry emphasis, which escaped him:

“No!—No! Certainly not.”

The man took a single deep breath. After it, he asked still another question:

“How old are you, my dear?” And she told him: “Twenty.”

Then said he:

“I am forty-three or forty-four, I forget which, and that makes altogether too great a difference between us, but it cannot be helped. Alas! one cannot grow young again—save, it seems, in spirit. Vittoria, will you do me the very great honor of marrying me?”

She gave a sudden cry of utter amazement—almost of fear, and she drew a little way back from him, staring. Temple put out one hand to her, but she shrank away still farther, and he withdrew the hand and put it behind him. The girl said, in a stumbling whisper:

“Wait—wait a moment, Beau! Let me think. It's—such a surprise. I don't know—”

She stood where she was, leaning against the low outer wall of the terrace for some time in silence, her hands clasped before her against her breast. The yellow light from the window fell out across her face,

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and Temple could see that the face was turned toward him, very still and wide eyed, but he could make out nothing from the expression of it. He began to explain.

"I repeat, child, that this is nothing new with me. It has been coming for a long time, but I wouldn't speak because—well, because you were so very young, and had had so little experience of the world—none at all, in fact. When this invitation of Mrs. Dudley's came, I was both glad and terrified—glad that you could at last have, even for a few months, a taste of the sort of life every girl has a right to—the life you've been cheated out of; terrified lest through it I lose you altogether. It was a—gamble, with most of the chances against me, but I welcomed it and made Pender let you go. I said to myself: 'If by some Heaven-sent miracle she comes back heart-whole, then at last you will have a right to speak, because then she will be able to answer from something like a clear understanding. She'll be grown up then,' I said to myself.

"And so," said Beaumont Temple, the novelist of the chosen few, "so here we are at last, my dear, face to face. What answer can you give me?"

The girl did not at once speak, and he went on further:

"I know under what a tremendous handicap I start the race. There's more than age alone. You have known me all your life. You've sat on my knee when you were little, and burrowed your head in my

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shoulder, and wept on me, and told me your troubles. I've been, always, a sort of second father to you, or an uncle, or a very much older brother. That's all against me. There's a lot against me. What's on the credit side? Precious little, I fear, save—love—and some understanding—and a passionate desire to take you out of this tomb, where you've been so long walled up, out into the world that you've already had a glimpse of now. It's a good place, this world. I heartily believe that. I should like to show it all to you—all the beautiful things there are—and I should like you to know the people who inhabit it. It's possible, Vittoria, it's just possible that I could make you happy. What d'you think?"

VIII

THE DRIVEN SHIP

AS literally and objectively as if a body of solid flesh had stepped between her and the light, the face of Richard Blake came before Vittoria's eyes and hung there against the darkness. She was not frightened, because the manifestation was nothing novel to her. She had long had the habit, learned perhaps from much solitude, of visualizing her thoughts more vividly than most people do, and she was accustomed to seeing Richard Blake at any hour of the day or night, a very real presence between her and the physical world round about. He came to her in many guises—or, should it be said, in many moods: sometimes she saw him as he had been on that very first evening of all—grave-eyed, tender, sympathetic, sharing her mood, understanding what was in her mind before she could give the thought words; and sometimes he came silent, frowning, troubled, as at a certain dinner-party; and sometimes he came in cold mockery, which was odd, because the girl had never really seen him like that in the flesh.

He came, or his wraith came, in mockery, on this evening. His eyes looked coldly upon Vittoria

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Fleming. She saw him laugh at her a little, and though in these strange appearances she never heard him speak, she yet imagined him to say words that Richard Blake could never under any conceivable circumstances have said to any woman. She imagined him to say:

"You might as well answer 'no' to this good man who is before you, and so have done with it, for you do not love him, and you will never love him or any other man in the world but me. I do not love you and I do not want you, but I will come between you and all other men so long as you may live, and you shall never forget me. Now, answer 'yes' to Beaumont Temple if you dare."

It was a grotesquely absurd speech, evolved altogether out of the shaken heart and the hurt pride and the extreme bitterness of Vittoria Fleming herself, but she imagined it to come from the presence which hung in darkness before her, and through which she saw but dimly the yellow oblong of the open window and the white shirt-front of Beaumont Temple, and the ruddy, lighted side of his face.

She gave a little shivering sob, and her hands, clasped together over her breast, strained together fiercely until the blood went out of the fingers. Temple thought he had distressed her, and uttered an exclamation of pity and of self-rebuke. The sound of his voice, strong and familiar, loved through many years, was like the call of the bells of home through the fog to a laboring ship. It rang of peace

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and comforts—safety and harbor. With outspread hands she thrust aside that misty, mocking presence as if it had been an actual mist, and she took two steps forward, which brought her where the man stood in wait. She was breathing fast. Beaumont Temple caught those groping hands in his and drew them together. The girl found herself with her face hidden upon his sturdy shoulder. It was not the first time, by any means, that it had been there.

She cried his name in a small voice wet with tears, and for a long time she could say no more, but at last she looked up to him. The light was across her face, in her dark eyes, and Temple regarded her gravely. He was wiser than most men, he may have seen more than love there, may have felt something unspoken, unexplained, in the shivering that wrung her. She said:

“Beau, you know better than I. Is it what you want of me that I feel for you? How can I be sure? . . . Beau, I'm far fonder of you than of anybody else in the world. I turn to you always, by sheer instinct, for comfort, or for help, or for wisdom. I trust you utterly. With all my heart, I wish— Oh, is that love, Beau?”

Even as she spoke, voices clamored and shouted within her that it was not, but she stilled them desperately. At least he meant shelter—light and warmth—and she was frightened to her depths. She clung to him.

The man smiled down upon her. He was very

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wise—or perhaps very brave—he did not attempt caresses. His arm about her shoulders held her loosely. It was the Beau Temple of old—the elder brother. He said:

“It is a great deal, my dear—more than I deserve. It will do to go on with, I think. I think I hardly expected that an old codger like me should have roused any great and romantic passion in you. If I am more to you than any other man, if you turn to me naturally, by instinct, it seems to me that I ought to be exceedingly happy and proud. Shall we go on, then, like this, for a little while? Shall we give you time to think it over—to look at me, if you find you can, in a somewhat new light? I don't want to rush you into anything, you know. I might frighten you and lose you. I want to give you time. Only—only, my very dear and beautiful child, I'm growing no younger, you know. Don't make me wait too long!”

Vittoria had hidden her face once more, but he made out that she said:

“I'll say 'yes' now, Beau, if you want me to.”

It was a cruel test of him, but the man bore it. He shook his head.

“I'm not a bully,” said he. “I won't hurry you. Think me over, Donna Vittoria, and see if I'll do.”

He laughed over her in the dark, and patted her shoulder with his big square hand—the same hand which wrote profound fiction, but didn't look it—again the elder brother. And presently the girl was

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able to laugh too. She fell to criticising his methods of love-making.

"If I were a famous novelist," said she, "and had made countless heroes propose to countless heroines in countless eloquent phrases, I think—I *think* I should be able to manage something better in my own case than you have put forward to-night, Beau. You make love like an amateur. You might at least have gone down on your knees."

"Vittoria," said he, "I should look like a fool on my knees. You'd laugh till you cried—and so, after a brief space of agony, should I." He shook his head sadly.

"It's a very difficult matter, this love-making. I've read wonderfully eloquent scenes in works of fiction or poetry—maybe I've even written one or two—but, my insatiable young friend, if any man should try to say those beautiful things to any woman in real life, she'd either laugh in his face or call for the police. You just can't be poetic nowadays. People have too much sense of humor."

"Of course," said Vittoria Fleming, humbly—"of course I am very young and inexperienced, but it has always been a cherished theory of mine that people in love had no sense of humor—lost it for the time being or mislaid it. I may be wrong." But she was not; she was right, and Temple admitted it.

They sat down side by side on the wall of the terrace, and talked for the space of what may have been an hour about what had happened—little

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enough it was—during Vittoria's absence, and they made plans for the future which included a great deal of tennis and many rides, and much golf over a nine-hole course which Temple was having laid out on his own broad acres of unprofitable land. Vittoria told him about the Faring's lease of a neighboring estate, and Temple, after a first unworthy prick of jealousy, was very glad to hear it, for it would mean a much gayer state of affairs than that somnolent countryside had known for a long time past.

"They'll be having house-parties, of course," said he, "though Heaven knows what they will find for their guests to do, hereabouts. Oh, we shall be rivalling Lenox and Tuxedo soon! How Pender will love it!" Vittoria gasped at that, for her father's possible attitude had never occurred to her.

"He'll hate it, won't he?" she cried. "I'd never thought of that. How dreadful! Beau, do you suppose he'll refuse to countenance it at all—to let me—well, do my part, you know? He loathes visitors. Will he refuse to let me have people in for lunch or dinner?"

"I'll make him play up!" said Temple, rashly. "Leave it to me. It will be a struggle, doubtless, but I'll make Pender behave decently. Your visit in New York was an entering wedge. Just you wait and see what follows it."

He rose to his feet.

"And now I must be off. It's late. Good-night, Miss Fleming!" She gave him her hands, and he

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kissed them lightly. But again he was wise—or brave, for he made no attempt to draw her back to those heights whereon they had stood for a little while—no more love-making. He said:

“Kiss Pender good-night for me! I’ll slip away without disturbing him.” So he went away into the house, and after a few moments she heard the wheels of his trap on the gravel of the drive, and listened to them until the sound was lost in the distance.

She sat still a little longer where she was, and then she, too, went in, and closed and locked the window after her. At the foot of the stairs she hesitated, but finally turned back and went down the hall to its farther end, where Pender Fleming’s study was, and she knocked on the door and went in.

Her father sat before his great flat-topped desk that was littered with books and papers and with writing things, and he was reading out of a leather-backed volume. He wore a green paper eye-shade with wire ends which went over his ears as do the bows of spectacles, and he looked, in it, like some strange, hitherto unknown monster—something perhaps from Mars. But at his daughter’s entrance he removed this adornment, and his pale face underwent the weird momentary distortion which passed with him for a smile. He said:

“Ah, my dear! Come to say good-night? That’s thoughtful of you. That’s thoughtful.” (It was also unusual.) The girl closed the door and came forward. The place was illuminated only by a single

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reading-lamp which hung low over the centre of the great table, masked above by an almost opaque shade, so that it cast a circle of yellow light. Elsewhere the room was in gloomy shadow, and the shapes of chairs or of other pieces of furniture crouched dim and grotesque in the half obscurity. Vittoria came to the edge of the circle of yellow lamplight and halted there. The glow, reflected from the things on the big table, struck upward upon the satin of her dress and upon her arms and neck, and gleamed in her sober eyes. She must have presented a very beautiful picture to Pender Fleming as he sat still, watching her, but she must have presented or suggested to him more than that. Something obscure to her, hidden from her understanding, seems to have wrung the man, for Vittoria saw his face alter, grow pinched and haggard, despite its vast pallidity, and she saw her father's eyes fix themselves in a strange stare as if they were seeing beyond this world's veil—visions very sweet or very terrible, or perhaps both together. She saw a strong shudder go over the man's heavy body from head to feet like a sudden violent chill, and a second one after that. She thought he was ill, and moved another step toward him, saying, quickly:

“What is it? What is it?” But at that he made a quick movement in his chair, and the odd, strained look went out of his face. He said:

“Has Beau Temple gone?” And Vittoria answered:

“Yes. He has just gone.” She was still a little

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troubled and alarmed, but she was afraid of Pender, and dared not ask him if he was suffering pain. He was always very impatient about queries of that sort. She laughed suddenly.

"Beau told me to kiss you good-night for him," she said, and at first her father frowned, then made one of his rare attempts at a smile—and that was twice in one evening.

"Beau has a privileged tongue," said he. "It's no good being angry with him because he wouldn't care. . . . Have you two—that is to say, has he—well, have you anything to tell me about Beau and yourself?"

Vittoria looked down upon him with some wonder because she had never before seen her father show any embarrassment. But, after a moment, she said:

"Yes, I have. Beau has asked me to marry him, and I suppose I shall do it."

"You suppose!" broke in the man. "What do you mean by 'suppose'? Don't you know whether you mean to marry him or not?"

"I asked him," said Vittoria, "to give me a little time to be more sure of myself—or I think he suggested it himself. It was all a great surprise to me. I hadn't expected it, you know."

"No! no!" said Pender Fleming, in a sort of pacified growl. "No, I dare say not. Well, I should be glad if you'd make up your mind as quickly as you can, and make it up to marry Beaumont Temple. You won't find another like him." He seemed to

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realize that he was lacking a little in parental gentleness, for he seemed to make an effort to soften his tone.

"I know," said he, "that you're very young, child, and I know women like to walk round a thing, and look at it, and turn their backs on it, and pretend they never wanted it at all before they finally pick it up. But I have set my heart on your marrying Beaumont Temple. I have hoped for a long time that it would come about. He's wise and steady, Beau is. His follies, if he ever had any, are behind him. He'll be a good husband—and, besides, he's no bad match. I don't follow such matters, but I suppose his reputation and standing as a writer are high."

"Oh yes, indeed!" said the girl at once. "Yes, very much so." But Pender went on, without heeding her:

"And since you seem to have come back from New York without having formed any foolish attachment there, as I was afraid you might do—" He stopped abruptly, and looked up at her with sharp eyes.

"That's true, I suppose? Eh?" And she said:

"Quite true!"

Pender noted the edge in her tone—the somewhat unnecessary emphasis, but laid it to maidenly scorn (which, in a sense, it certainly was). So he went on:

"I advise you to give Beau his answer with as little delay as possible. Don't dawdle!"

"I won't keep him waiting too long," said she.

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"I'm very, very fond of him. The only question is, am I fond enough, and in the right way? I dare say I am."

She bent over and kissed her father's cheek, and started to leave the room, but after a moment's hesitation turned back. She said:

"There's something that I suppose you ought to know. I don't want to pain you by referring to it, but perhaps you ought to know. Mrs. Dudley told me about my mother. I found out that she had known her, and I asked for all she could tell me."

Pender Fleming gave a violent shiver, and caught his breath. Afterward he spoke to himself in a dry whisper, but, when that was done, he cried, harshly:

"What did that woman tell you? Every word! Tell me every word!"

Vittoria repeated as well as she could exactly what Catharine Dudley had told her, and she had an excellent memory, so that she repeated it almost word for word. She was not surprised at her father's manner, for she knew that it tried him beyond all bearing to speak of his dead wife or to hear her spoken of. She had always known that. From earliest childhood she had been taught by nurses and governesses that her mother must never be spoken of—Pender's sacred grief respected in complete silence. She regretted having to break that long silence now, but, as she had said, she thought the man ought to know what she had learned. And she looked down upon him with sorrow, and with more

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sympathy than she had ever before felt for her father, and with something like a touch of awe in the face of such deathless mourning.

Pender sat silent through her explanation, silent after it, his heavy chin sunk upon his breast, so that his face was in deep shadow, and the top of his bald head, strange and moonlike, alone illuminated. He sat there quite motionless for a long time, and the girl stood before him waiting, but at last he spoke in his ordinary voice—dry, and without the least expression. Vittoria had expected almost anything of him—anger, bitter reproof, perhaps (and this was a vague hope) a breaking down of that long reserve—father and daughter brought closer through a common love and a common sorrow. She had thought that much might come of it, but all that Pender Fleming said, in that dry, expressionless voice of his, was:

“Good-night! Good-night!” And he did not even look up.

Vittoria turned, and went out of the room.

IX

A FEW QUIET DAYS

VITTORIA passed the week following her return to Standish very restfully and pleasantly. Now that the interest and excitement of the season were over, she found that the long strain of activity and the insufficient sleep had taxed her strength much more than she had realized, and she was glad to be completely idle for a time. She rode a little, either alone or with Beaumont Temple, and once or twice she played tennis—very much off her form, and often she took long, rambling, leisurely walks across the hills and uplands attended only by one of the Gordon setters or by her Irish terrier, Mr. Hennessy.

She had abundant time in these days to look back over the past five months, to relive them in fancy, as all women, and particularly all girls, love to do. The period stood out from the rest of her life as letters printed in red stand out from a black-and-white page, and sometimes it was difficult for her to believe that it was really true and not a sort of Cinderella dream. There was much in it to be reviewed with delight—with smiles and laughter—and very little to regret. She was mildly sorry for those last ten days—for

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what low people might call her "whirlwind finish," but, after all, it had been nothing very desperate—a few stolen meetings with the amusing Monty Bellingham, a few motor rides with rather frowned-upon people like the Vernons and the Haddon-Beldings, who, Vittoria shrewdly suspected, led nothing like the murky careers they boasted of. And, after all, the "whirlwind finish" had accomplished the desired object. It had, by sheer force of filling all her waking hours, deadened thought at a time when thought would have hurt her.

It would have hurt her now, would have become intolerable, but that she had learned how successfully any train of thought can be kept out of mind by sheer force of will. All people who have suffered great grief or temptation or anxiety know that the mind is a sort of well, whose waters are at the top pure and clear and amply sufficient for daily use through a long period. But they know that at the bottom of the well lurks always the thing they dread, quiet, but alive and unforgotten; and they know that some day the waters will be disturbed, or the well run dry, and then the thing at the bottom will rise again and have its way with them.

Vittoria thought that the thing which lay deep down at the bottom of her mind might die if she left it there untouched, unnourished. Indeed, she was almost sure, since she seemed to have so little difficulty, once the trick was learned, in keeping her thoughts from it altogether. There was no reason

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to suppose that she would see Richard Blake for a very long time, and it was quite possible that the long time might become never, since he was abroad in remote lands almost constantly. In any case, she argued, she could not possibly see him until another season, and by that time she would be safely married to Beaumont Temple.

She looked ahead to her probable marriage with, after the first maidenly fears were done, a calm and contented mind. Its only alternative appeared to be an indefinite continuation of her lonely life at Standish, and the months in New York had taught her how intolerable that would be. Moreover, she was exceedingly fond of Beau Temple, and she could imagine going through life with him very happily indeed. They would travel a good deal, she thought, and they would spend at least a part of the winter in New York—perhaps go to London for May and June. She knew that he would be tender with her always, never unreasonable or ill tempered, and she knew that she ought to be very proud indeed to have won the love of a man who had achieved so much and who was so much in demand wherever he went. She was proud of it, and she thought of him very tenderly as she sat in her garden, or walked across the wooded hills with Mr. Hennessy, and looked forward into that pleasant life which was to come.

She realized, of course, that what she felt for Temple was—as he himself had said to her—no great romantic passion. It was not at all the state

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of mind of the enamoured ladies in certain of her works of fiction, but she doubted if that somewhat hectic state of mind was to be desired. The works of fiction themselves bore witness that it was exceedingly unrestful and that people subject to it were almost always in hot water of some kind: they seemed always to be pursued by malignant fates and to have altogether a terrible time of it. Further, it must be remembered that Vittoria had never been brought in actual contact with a serious love-affair—had never seen one in progress, for the mild flirtations and the preliminary flutterings of the *débutante* set in New York could by no means come under so important a head. A number of very young men and one or two elder ones (with wives) had spoken to her of love, and had seemed quite feverish and harrowed up about it, but the girl herself had remained untouched—untouched save in one never-to-be-forgotten instance, and that must not be thought of—must be buried from sight — smothered — killed. Certainly the strange agony of that solitary experience was not such as to make her long for a repetition of it in her relation to Beau Temple. Better infinitely the peace and quiet and calm that she knew so well and that so contented her.

“I won’t keep dear Beau waiting too long,” she said once to Mr. Hennessy, as they sat on a granite-ribbed hill-slope, a mile or two from home. “A little longer—a few days longer—for pride’s sake, and then I’ll tell him, and make him go to town for a pearl

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ring." She even decided, after some anxious thought, that the ring should have two pearls, not too large and not too small, but just right—one pink one and one bluish white.

She had another pleasant thing to look forward to during these quiet days, and that was the arrival of the Harry Farings in the old Lee place, two miles away. She and Beaumont Temple between them laid siege to Pender at luncheon one day on this subject. Pender, all unconscious of threatening peril, had seemed uncommonly human that day, and had even been heard to laugh. Vittoria met Temple's eyes across the table, saw him nod, and made her preliminary announcement. It was the first Fleming had heard of the matter. He looked up at the girl uneasily, scowled, looked down again, and at last said that the Farings' movements were no concern of his. He added that he didn't know *them*, anyhow. But then Beaumont Temple took a hand. He said:

"Rubbish, Pender! You can't forever go on playing the hibernating bear. You must remember that you've got a young lady to consider nowadays, not a child. These Farings are charming people, who have done almost as much for Vittoria as Catharine Dudley has done. She has been at their house a hundred times, and on intimate terms. You're enormously in their debt."

Pender could have wept for sheer rage and alarm. He must have heard his castle walls crumbling about him. But the younger man pressed on:

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"I, for one, am immensely glad they're coming, both for Vittoria's sake and for my own. As for you, you'll have to do your neighborly part or write yourself down quite blind to all decency."

For sheer panic the master of Standish was near an explosion just then, but Vittoria interposed to say that there would be no need of anything elaborate in the way of entertaining, since the Farings intended to be very quiet indeed.

"They will have people down for Friday-to-Mondays I suppose," said she, "but the rest of the time Harry Faring will be at work, and Béatrix and I can just ride about or play golf over Beau's new links.

"Of course," she said, "if you don't mind, I should almost have to have them here occasionally for lunch or dinner, but they won't expect more than that."

So Pender, breathing hard, was allowed to come off better than he had feared, but when he had fled to cover Beaumont Temple shook his head over the girl, saying:

"That was foolish of you, my dear. We had him bound hand and foot—for, after all, Pender does realize that there's such a thing as the repayment of obligations. Hand and foot we had him bound, and now you've well-nigh released him again. You're too soft-hearted with Pender."

"He looked so frightened and miserable, Beau!" the girl cried. "I couldn't bear it. Poor father!"

"Poor you, I say!" returned the man. "Are we going to ride, this afternoon?"

X

“FOR THOSE IN PERIL ON THE SEA”

VITTORIA rode over to the old Lee place (which, for obvious reasons, was called Cedar Hill) on the day after the Farings' arrival. She found a man to take her horse, and was climbing the steps of the big colonial porch with its high pillars, when Béatrix Faring came round the corner of the house, aproned, gauntleted, and smeared with earth, flourishing a large gardener's trowel as she approached.

“Dear child,” she said, “this is more than sweet of you! Lean over and kiss me with great care. Don't touch me anywhere, because I'm the grubbiest being in all New England. There's a duck of an old gardener here who has been letting me dig in the flower-beds. He has a big white beard and no mustache. Fancy!” They accomplished the kiss with some difficulty but complete success, and Mrs. Faring shook herself free of the enormous gauntlets.

“I'm afraid you'll have to help me out of this apron,” she said. “I borrowed it from the gardener's wife, and I've not the faintest idea of where it comes apart: somewhere behind, I think. Look about,

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there's a dear!" Between them they freed her from this garment, and she looked down at her frock with a mild dismay.

"It's quite spoiled, isn't it? Well, I've had fun grubbing, anyhow. I was just like a dog digging out a badger. The dirt flew to both sides of me and over my head, and that ducky gardener hopped up and down on one foot, and moaned:

"'Saftly, mem! Saftly! Ye'll ha'e 'm a' oot by the rutts,' meaning, I dare say, the plants." She held Vittoria by the shoulders and examined her.

"You've been resting!" she said. "You're looking heavenly, my dear. I never saw you look so well. You're pounds fatter, and it becomes you very much. How'd you manage it in ten days' time?"

"Oh, lying in the grass and letting the sun shine on me," said the girl. "Take me in and show me the house; I've never been inside it, you know. No one has lived here since I can remember."

Mrs. Faring laughed, and said:

"You'll scream when you see some of the things. They're very comic. But, altogether, we shall be quite comfortable here, I think. There's heaps of room, and I can hide away a few of the worst monstrosities." She explained, as she went in, that they had sent the servants down three days ahead of them, and so had found the house fresh and clean and habitable when they arrived. Indeed, Vittoria saw that it bore no visible trace of having been unoccupied for many years. It was in no way a remarkably

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beautiful house, but the rooms were large and well arranged and of good proportion. The house itself was a hundred years old or more, and the chief decoration and the larger pieces of furniture were simple and massive and good, but the generation of Lees which had inhabited it during the seventies and early eighties would seem to have been unable to withstand that wave of atrocious taste which swept across the country in their day, for the fine big colonial rooms were full of stuffed satin chairs which looked so much like little, fat, absurd gentlemen that one fairly listened to hear them pant and wheeze; and of sofas apparently constructed of a series of pink sausages; and of contorted seats made like a letter S, so that two people could sit in them turned opposite ways, but with their faces six inches apart.

"Did you ever see anything more horrible?" cried Béatrix Faring, pointing to these last atrocities. "They must have been made for people who wanted to kiss each other by the hour and be thoroughly comfortable over it. I haven't found any wax fruit under glass globes, but there are two china dogs of an unknown species on that what-not in the corner. (Isn't that what you call them—'what-nots'? I learned the name from the caretaker.) And I, with my own hands, have removed three silk scarves which were draped gracefully over the frames of some family portraits. You must see the portraits. There's a Stuart and two Copleys, and one that I think is a Romney, but I can't find the signature."

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They went through the lower part of the house and out upon a covered side porch, from which there was a magnificent view across the hills, northward, and then Mrs. Faring took the girl up to her own sunny and pleasant sitting-room in the story above; but as they were coming down the stairs again, she said:

"Oh, I forgot to tell you! We brought a guest down with us—a friend of yours. Give you three guesses, and help you out by telling you to begin on—that it's a man!"

"Heavens! how should I know?" said Vittoria. "It might be any one of fifty. Only *don't* tell me that it is Mr. Bellingham, because if it is I shall hide. I had enough of him in New York." The name of Richard Blake never for an instant occurred to her, because she had no reason to connect him with the Farings. She even did not know that they were friends.

"It's not Monty Bellingham," said the elder woman. "Guess again! Well, I sha'n't tell you. I shall let it be a complete surprise, and watch your faces, when you meet, for a guilty blush." She said that in a light tone, but she meant it literally. She was very curious to find out how much, if at all, the girl would be affected by learning that Blake had followed her to her stronghold. She had thought about the affair a good deal during the past ten days. Richard Blake had told her that there was no reason whatever for believing that Miss Fleming regarded

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him as anything but a casual acquaintance, and a rather rude one at that; but the speech had not quite agreed with certain other half admissions of his, nor at all with his manner. So she had taken the liberty of disbelieving it, and had made up her mind that there was a good deal more on Vittoria's side than the man would confess. She remembered the girl's feverish activity and recklessness during her last fortnight in town, and, being a woman, understood it in the light of what she partly knew, partly guessed. Altogether she had arrived at a conclusion which was oddly close to the truth, but fell somewhat short of it. It must, however, be borne in mind that she knew nothing of Beaumont Temple's arrival in the lists.

"It's not Monty Bellingham," she said, again. "It's a real man, and one I'm very fond of myself; but if I were threatened with death or serious bodily injury, I should probably give way and confess that his reasons for coming here had more to do with Miss Vittoria Fleming than with me—and I call it rather noble of me to tell you."

"Well, I give it up," the girl said. "I give it up. I sha'n't even try to guess. I only hope he's one of the nice ones. Where have you concealed him? And where, by the way, is Mr. Faring?"

The elder woman explained that her husband and guest were out at the stables, but broke off to listen, and said:

"I think they're coming. I think I hear them. Have you your blush ready?"

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Vittoria heard footsteps on the porch below—the big front door was open—and Harry Faring's voice saying something about the rotten road between Mickleham and Stamford. Then two men came into the doorway, and stood there a moment before entering.

Her hand dropped away from Mrs. Faring's shoulder as if the strength had gone out of it, and she gave a single exclamation—just a little “oh!”—in a low tone, but Béatrix Faring thought that one quiet sound told more than any complete sentence or even any long explanation that she had ever heard. It is odd, but she thought instantly of the story that used to be told of a certain famous tragedian who is now dead—that he could make people weep bitterly by the recital of the cardinal numbers from one to twenty. She looked into Vittoria's face with some anxiety, and the anticipated blush had not come there, but an even pallor instead, and she put up one arm behind the girl's shoulders, wondering if she might be about to faint.

Just then the men came into the hall below, and glanced up to where the two were standing midway of the stairs. Harry Faring gave a shout of welcome, ran part of the way up to where they were, and Vittoria advanced to meet him. They went on down to the foot of the stairs, and Faring asked:

“You've met Richard Blake, haven't you?” His wife tried to break in and spare the girl, but Vittoria said, quite easily:

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"Oh yes, indeed. I should think I had! Mr. Blake saved my silly neck once when I had fallen off a horse and was being dragged. I've never had a chance to thank him properly." She put out her hand to the younger man, and Blake took it for an instant, but Mrs. Faring saw that the girl kept her eyes down, and, as soon as Blake had released her hand, turned a little away from him, though he was stumbling through some rather incoherent disclaimer of having rendered any very useful service. Mrs. Faring interposed, quickly:

"Well, I call saving anybody's life doing them a rather useful service, you know." And Vittoria laughed, and said:

"Yes, my neck is useful to me, in spite of Mr. Blake's depreciation of it." She drew Harry Faring aside with some remark about the dreadful stuffed furniture, and they moved away into one of the rooms beyond.

Béatrix Faring waited until they were gone, and then touched Richard Blake upon the arm. He had been staring after the other two, and turned back to her with a start.

She looked into his face very seriously.

"You'll have to be careful," she said. "I was idiotic enough not to warn her that you were here. I merely told her that we had a guest, and she was wondering who it could be when you came into the door. She turned quite white. You'll have to be careful. I imagine she resents your avoiding her."

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Why didn't you tell me you had saved her life? Men are such—oh, I could slap you! You deserve to lose her, and you'll do it, too, if you don't begin to behave like a sane human being. She frightened me cold when she went white like that. You can't have told me half the truth on that day in town."

"I told you all I knew," he protested. "You're imagining things now. What do you want me to do?"

"Be a little bit human!" cried the exasperated lady. "You look and act like a graven image, like a soldier on parade—and a recruit at that. See if you can't talk and make motions! Come along!"

They pursued the other two and caught them up on the north porch, where they had gone, as Harry Faring put it, to see if the view was still there. Blake did his desperate utmost to "talk and make motions" as he had been bidden, but all the many devils of perversity seemed to have him in their grip, and he was like a man frozen. It was his instinct, as it is the instinct of most men, to take a firm hold upon himself in moments of great strain, and he did not realize how complete a thing that hold was. As at the dinner-party of their second meeting, he was cold and silent, and had the air of being extremely bored. Béatrix Faring saw and understood, and in her despair could have shaken the man. She made an excuse for drawing her husband back into the house, and avoided Vittoria's wrathful eye as she went, but when, in five minutes, they returned, the

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two were talking stiffly about some of their friends in New York, and in each of the girl's cheeks a little red spot was burning.

In justice to the man, awkward and self-conscious though he was, it must be conceded that during this brief interval he had made an heroic effort to lay aside his armor, to hark back to the oddly intimate footing upon which the first and the last of their meetings had taken place, but the girl was thoroughly angry, and met him with an icy indifference which was impregnable.

It is a favorite and untiring reproach on the part of critics, both literary and dramatic, that the complications of many romances and plays hang upon lovers' quarrels, misunderstandings due to the exaggerated and tragic pride of young people who would rather suffer than explain. The critical gentlemen are very fond of scoffing at this so-called artificial means of prolonging an agony, and they have certain set phrases for the expression of their scorn which they can write with their backs turned and their eyes closed (perhaps even with their hands tied). Yet these same beings know perfectly well that, in real life, it is just this prideful silence at a moment when a dozen frank words would explain everything which is responsible for half the bitter misunderstandings, half the broken hearts, in this perverse and stubborn world. There has never been any satisfactory explanation of why most people should prefer their dignity to their happiness, but

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people are so, and if the critical gentlemen do not like it in works of fiction, at least they have to put up with it in real life—and that is some satisfaction to the present scribe.

The things which afterward came to pass in the history of Vittoria Fleming and of Richard Blake and of certain other people were not altogether dependent upon the absurd attitude of these two toward each other on the occasion of their fourth meeting, but the meeting had, for all that, at least one direct and important and far-reaching consequence, and so this history does depend somewhat upon it.

Vittoria remained not more than an hour at Cedar Hill, and then, upon some plausible pretext, got away. When her horse was led round, Richard Blake put her up, and, while performing the feat, asked permission to call at Standish. There was no way of refusing short of absolute rudeness, and she said rather ungraciously that she would be glad to see him there. But she made a mental note to avoid the meeting by all possible means. Then she waved her crop to the three on the porch, and rode away.

She began to feel the reaction from the hour's strain as soon as ever her back was turned, and, as the horse picked its way at an easy trot down the long slope toward the open gates, she was aware that her heart was pounding, and, with a sudden access of rage, she was aware that she wanted to cry. She beat the clinched fist of her free right hand fiercely

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upon her knee, winked hard a few times, and at least the disgrace of tears was put behind her. She cried, aloud:

"Why did he come here? Why?" And her horse pricked up its ears and shook its head once or twice, as if it felt unable to venture an opinion.

"He has spoiled everything!" she said, but not aloud this time. And, indeed, she seemed to be right. The pleasant, easy intercourse which she had hoped for between the three houses bade fair to be completely wrecked by Blake's unexplained presence. She could not imagine why he had come. Surely it could not have been, as Béatrix Faring had laughingly intimated, because Cedar Hill was near to Standish, because he had had the air of a man bored to extinction in her presence. To be sure, he had made one attempt, but obviously at the expense of great effort, to be a little more polite, but doubtless that had come from a sort of belated sense of duty to his hostess's guest. Certainly it was not to be near Vittoria Fleming that he had come. Why come at all, then, since there were none of the ordinary amusements to be had near Cedar Hill? She shook her head and gave up wondering, but she could not dismiss the man so easily as that. He meant, or had meant, too much to her. She saw his face, a little pale, and drawn into the hard, stern lines which his fierce effort at control had set upon it, and she saw his eyes, and quite suddenly there came back to her, like a remembered scent, or a vivid, never-forgotten pict-

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ure, the sensation of being lifted and carried in his arms and laid down upon the turf by the roadside. Involuntarily she closed her eyes, opened them again, and looked up into Blake's face that was bent above her. It was still drawn into those hard, stern lines, but they were lines of anxiety and fear for her, and his eyes glowed and his breath came short and fast.

Vittoria covered her eyes with her hand and shivered a little. She was thoroughly frightened. Was all this to be gone over again? Was that new-found control of hers, that power to forget, to put out of mind—was it to be made helpless all in an hour because Richard Blake was once more near at hand?

"What shall I do?" she cried, once more aloud. "I don't know what to do." This thing was stronger than she, and she knew it. In an instant it had swept her feeble defences away, as a resistless surge sweeps over and beats down an ill-made dike. Without some sure refuge she was lost now, indeed!

But there was a refuge, true and tried and sure: a harbor, she said to herself, safe from all the storms that blow. Only she did not know yet what storms there are on these uncertain seas. She had come to a fork in the road, and one branch led home to Standish and the other east by south toward Beaumont Temple's stronghold. She turned her horse into the second branch, and quickened its pace to a gallop.

The road was a narrow, winding road, with high banks at either side, and ragged hedgerows of hazel

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and brier atop the banks. Here and there dwarf oaks leaned crooked branches down from above, and sometimes Vittoria had to bend her head and lean forward in the saddle to avoid them. The horse settled down to its stretching gallop with a little snort of pleasure, for it was fresh and needed the exercise.

So she fled down through the hollow lane, and birds rose chattering before her, and once or twice a hare started up almost from under the horse's hoofs. She made short work of the three miles, and almost before Vittoria realized it she was mounting the long rise of Lone Tree Hill.

XI

THE PORT IN THE STORM

TEMPLE himself came to meet her, for he had seen her approaching, and had called a stable-boy to take her horse. He cried:

“My dear child, this is more than good of you! This is angelic! A gift from Heaven! Here was I lounging crossly about the place, smoking my pipe, and wishing that something nice would turn up. What good deed have I done that I should have my wish gratified in this fashion?”

He led her up to the deep side veranda which he had added to his old house, and which was, in reality, a sort of summer-room, enclosed by wire screens and set about with comfortable cane chairs, and with tables whereon lay newspapers and magazines. He lived here a great deal in the warm season, for the place had the breeze from three sides, and sometimes he locked the door which led into the house and did his work here.

He said: “Like the well-known father, I saw you while you were yet afar off and ran to meet you. The fatted calf is even now being killed, and will presently appear in long glasses with ice clinking about in it.

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Meanwhile, sit down and be as patient as you can!" He pulled forward a cane deck-chair with cushions tied upon it, but Vittoria would not sit down. She said:

"No. Let me stand for a while. I came to tell you something." She was a little pale, and her manner was strained and unnatural. The man's heart sank within him, but he managed a smile that was not too unlike his kindly usual smile, and he said:

"Out with it, then! Let's have it over!" She said:

"You—a few days ago, Beau, you asked me to marry you. And I asked for time to think it over."

"Yes," said Beaumont Temple, under his breath. "Yes. I have hardly forgotten." His face had turned very grave.

"Well," said she, "I have— If you still want me, Beau, I will marry you. I want to marry you. That's all."

Temple gave a sudden cry of joy, and the blood rushed to his face, so that it was, for an instant, crimson. Still, he held back. He demanded:

"Freely, child? You come to me freely—of your own will? Pender hasn't been at you?"

"Father has had nothing to do with it," she said. "I come of my own will. Do you want me?"

He did not say whether he wanted her or not, but his eyes were shining as she had never before seen them shine. He took a swift step toward her, his arms held out, and Vittoria never knew that she

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shrank a little back from him. He came another step forward, but abruptly halted, and said:

"Hang that gardener! Must he cut my grass at this historic moment?" The sound of a mowing-machine came to Vittoria's ears, and she gave a little, hysterical laugh. She was conscious of a faint and vague sense of relief, but the moment was too full of strain for analysis.

"What are the greatest and most wonderful words," said Beau Temple, "in which gratitude and joy and triumph can be expressed? I don't know them. I seem to be tongue-tied. It is my trade to string words together, but they fail me now when I have sorest need of them. Oh, child, you have filled me too full! I cannot speak.

"I shall try to make you happy," he said. "That seems to be all I can say." And Vittoria nodded gravely. She felt rather solemn and a little breathless, for the die was cast now; but she also felt safe—and that was what she wanted.

"I know you will do that, Beau," said she. "I feel safe with you—so perfectly safe!"

Even through the stress of his emotion the man was conscious of the rather odd choice of words and of the emphasis with which they were spoken. But he, too, was beyond analysis just then, swallowed up in contentment.

The fatted calf was brought in tall glasses—ginger ale with a lemon skin coiled serpentlike in it—and Vittoria sat down in the cane arm-chair and

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took her glass into both hands, making little purring noises over it like a cat with a saucer of milk. She had a passion for this beverage, and Temple never forgot to provide it on her rare visits.

"I feel very cosey and domestic already, Beau," she said. And the man beamed over her with such an air of absurd proprietorship that she broke into a fit of laughter and found it hard to stop. Temple saw the strain under which she was laboring, but it seemed to him not unnatural. She had done a brave thing to come there alone with her offer, and he could have gone down on his kness to her for it. With the very laudable and unselfish aim of sparing the girl by turning the conversation to less personal things, he asked if the Farings had arrived at Cedar Hill, and she said:

"Oh yes, they arrived yesterday. I've just come from there. I rode over to say a word of welcome." He asked if they had brought down any guests, and, after a moment, Vittoria said:

"One—a man I met in New York. Mr. Blake." But at that name Temple, who had been standing at a little distance, turned upon her sharply with an exclamation.

"What? What was that?"

She said the name again, but with his eyes upon her it was difficult, and she looked down into the glass that she held between her hands.

"Mr. Blake—Richard Blake. I think I remember his saying—that he knew you." Temple turned

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away again in silence, and took a turn up and down the porch with his hands clasped behind him. Once the girl looked up for an instant, and it seemed to her that his face betrayed astonishment and not a little concern. She wondered, but not greatly, for she was struggling hard for self-control.

After a brief silence the man halted before her, and asked:

"Do you know this Mr.—Blake very well?" And Vittoria said:

"No, not very well." But upon that she took a quick breath, and said, hurriedly:

"Beau, I shall—want you to help me a little. This Mr.—Richard Blake—I'm sorry he has come here, and I don't want to have to see any more of him than can be helped. It sounds very ungrateful, because Mr. Blake saved my life once when I had fallen from my horse in the Park and was being dragged. He happened to be near, and saved me. But—in spite of that—I can't explain just now—Perhaps he will go back to town soon, anyhow. Then it will be all right. Meanwhile—"

"Meanwhile," Temple interrupted, "you want to avoid him. Naturally! We'll manage it somehow." He took up his walk once more, back and forth across the broad porch, and he was frowning. Once or twice he spoke to himself, and Vittoria heard him say that something was "incredible," but what it was he did not explain. He seemed oddly disturbed.

There came from somewhere out of sight beyond

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the house the sound of a voice of curiously beautiful timbre, and then a little phrase of French song.

"Who is that?" asked Vittoria. "What a lovely voice! Who is that singing?" And Temple again swung about with an exclamation, but this time of pleasure. He said:

"Ah! I forgot to tell you. I too have a guest. He came yesterday, and in a manner very characteristic of him—out of the blue sky, as it were, with only a few hours' warning. You have heard me speak of Raoul de Coucy, I'm sure. I knew him very well a long time ago in France, and whenever I go there, nowadays, I spend a fortnight with him. What has brought him to America I cannot imagine, but I am very grateful to whatever it may be, for I think there is no man living of whom I am fonder."

"De Coucy?" said Vittoria. "That is rather a tremendous name, isn't it?—or, at least, used to be long ago. Only the other day I came upon a little book of Viollet-le-Duc's about the Château."

"You must tell Raoul that," said Temple. "He'll be pleased because he is a perfectly authentic De Coucy and the last of the name, though, of course, the name has not been very important since—when was it, the early fifteenth century? Still, as you say, it was tremendous once. They stood on an equality with kings. D'you know their motto?"

"'Roi ne suys, ne prince, ne duc, ne comte aussi. Je suys le sire de Coucy.' How's that for feudal

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arrogance?" He went to the end of the porch, and called his friend's name.

"Raoul! Raoul! Viens ici, je te prie!" The beautiful voice answered him from a distance, and he turned back. He said:

"I must warn you that De Coucy is entirely blind, but he's very clever in getting about, and you'd hardly suspect his infirmity if you weren't told of it."

A gray-haired man came round the corner of the house, walking slowly over the grass and twirling a little cane in his hand. He was attended by a servant, who moved close beside him and a step behind. The man carried a Panama hat in his left hand, for, although it was but late May, the weather had been for some weeks unseasonably warm, and the day was like July. He was a little more exquisitely dressed than any Anglo-Saxon man would have cared to be, not in the elder and formal French fashion, but in the style of the modern Parisian *élégant*. He wore the serge lounge-suit of informality, but the jacket fitted his slender waist like a woman's jacket, and was of a deep violet hue. The pale tones of shirt and cravat and out-peeping *pochette* bespoke the genius of the well-known M. Charvet of the rue de la Paix, and his boots (with violet tops!) were of that peculiar flesh-colored tan which is never seen outside of Latin countries, and which seems to have been made out of the skin of a very pale mulatto.

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The gray-haired man turned his face toward the screened porch as he rounded the corner, and called:

“Me voici, mon vieux! Me voici!” And it seemed to Vittoria that she had never heard a speaking voice, whether of man or of woman, that was so extraordinarily musical in timbre. It was as if it sang in saying the most casual words. The servant moved forward past his master, and held open the door into the porch. Vittoria saw that M. de Coucy's little twirling stick just touched the lowest of the steps, as it were by accident, and then he came up them and into the porch without the slightest groping or hesitation.

Beaumont Temple went to meet his friend, and took him by the arm. He said:

“I am to have the pleasure and the rather extraordinary privilege of introducing two great houses—Corner and Coucy. Raoul, I have the honor to present you to Donna Vittoria Fleming, whose grandfather was the head of the Cornaro.” The Frenchman smiled, and extended his hand a little way. Vittoria saw that his face was almost as beautiful as his voice. It was lean and bore the marks of age, for the man was nearly sixty, but the features were of the most exquisite delicacy and the skin was as fine in texture as any woman's. He wore a little mustache with the ends waxed and turned upward, and his gray hair was cut *en brosse*, but it was soft hair and lay back in short waves in-

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stead of bristling fiercely erect, as does the hair of so many Frenchmen.

Vittoria put her hand in his, and he bent over and kissed it. He said, using the old ceremonious title as if the girl were perhaps her great-grandmother:

"Illustrious madonna, I precipitate myself at your feet, and count it a very happy privilege."

"This is historic," said Beaumont Temple, laughing. "I feel a sense of extreme inadequacy to the occasion. There should have been red carpet and photographers. I am humiliated at my lack of foresight."

A servant approached just then to tell him that he was wanted at the telephone for a long-distance message, and he turned to go into the house. But he said over his shoulder:

"Donna Vittoria knows all about your forebears, Raoul. She has been reading Viollet-le-Duc." So he left the two together. The telephone message proved to be very bothersome, for it was from New York, and the communication, as so often happens with long-distance calls, was interrupted two or three times, and he had to wait for it to be made again. So in all he was detained for ten or fifteen minutes, and put badly out of temper.

He returned to his guests full of apologies, but they seemed to be talking together rather gravely and with every appearance of mutual interest. They had changed from English, which De Coucy used well

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enough but with some stiffness, to French, which Vittoria spoke very well indeed, having had French nurses and governesses. But as he rejoined them the girl rose, and said that she must be going home, for it was late. So he had her horse brought round, and put her up himself. They were out of earshot from the screened porch, and he asked:

"I hope you and De Coucy got on well? He is rather a wonderful man when one comes to know him. I should like you two to like each other." Vittoria seemed to give the matter a moment's sober consideration, but after that she said:

"I think we shall. I liked him, and I hope he liked me. He is very wise."

Temple wondered how she had had an opportunity to find that out in fifteen minutes at the most, but there was no time to discuss it now, and he turned to more intimate matters, demanding to know when he was to see her next.

"I would ride over to Standish this evening," said he, "but that Raoul wants to talk over some affair of his with me. Shall it be to-morrow?"

She said: "Yes, to-morrow. Perhaps if I'm riding to-morrow afternoon I'll call on you again. In any case, come in the evening!" Then she gave him her hand for a moment that prolonged itself somewhat beyond the necessities, and so rode away down the hill.

But when she had gone Temple went back into the screened porch, and, since the horse and its rider were

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still in sight, he stood a little while looking after them. The Frenchman said, behind him:

"That is a very lovely and charming young lady. And I think she is also very beautiful. Am I not right? I wonder—" He made an odd and pathetic gesture. He raised one hand and covered his eyes with it, as people do when they wish to shut out all vision for an effort of memory. He said:

"She reminds me very much indeed, though in an inexplicable fashion, of another lovely lady whom I seem to have known long ago, but my memory fails me just now. Later on, when I am no longer thinking of it, the lady's name and the circumstances will return to me. I remember only that she was very sweet and very charming, and that she was unhappy. This jeune fille also is unhappy. Why? Why is she unhappy?"

Temple swung about with an exclamation of amused astonishment.

"Unhappy!" he cried. "Well, I trust she's not that. She—" He hesitated a moment, and a bit of color came into his cheeks. "She may have seemed a little—distracted to-day. That would be natural in view of certain circumstances—a little moved out of her usual calm, perhaps. But unhappy? Oh no!"

"She is unhappy," said the Frenchman, in a tone of unstirred conviction. "I, who have no eyes to see, have other senses that are very keen. What is making that young lady unhappy?" Temple drew a long breath, for the other man's words chilled

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him—the words and his own confidence in De Coucy's almost uncanny intuition. The blind man was seldom wrong. Unbidden, the thought of Richard Blake came before him, and he remembered Vittoria's words, remembered that she had explained nothing—had spoken only, and very briefly, of her desire to see as little of the other man as she could.

Richard Blake! That name meant a good deal to Temple, for he knew certain things that the girl did not know. So Vittoria had been meeting Richard Blake in New York, and now that young man would seem to have followed her back into the country. He reflected that it was he himself who had persuaded Pender Fleming to send his daughter to New York, and here was the outcome of it! She had found Richard Blake there. He, Beaumont Temple, who loved her, had brought that about.

It seemed to him well-nigh uncanny. It seemed to him that there must be something preordained, fatal, in it all, and a sudden shiver wrung him despite the warm sunshine in which he stood.

Richard Blake!

Over the surface of his deeper concern came the question: "Why does she not wish to see the man? Is she afraid, or does she dislike him?" He wondered a little about that, but gave up wondering because he could not possibly know unless Vittoria chose to tell him.

A creaking movement of De Coucy's chair recalled

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his attention, and he started, as one does in waking from a reverie. He said:

"I beg your pardon, Raoul; my thoughts wandered. What was it you asked?"

"I asked," said the Frenchman, "what it was that is making Mademoiselle Fleming unhappy? But perhaps you cannot tell."

"No," said Beaumont Temple, in a low voice; "no, my friend, I cannot tell. I didn't know. It is very bitter to me to think that she may be unhappy, for her happiness means a great deal to me. I hope to marry Miss Fleming, Raoul."

The blind Frenchman sprang to his feet, his hands outstretched before him, his face full of tenderness and of pain.

"Ah, mon vieux! mon vieux!" he cried. "Forgive me. I didn't know. And I didn't mean what I said. Mon cher ami, I am an imbecile."

Temple regarded him with a wry smile.

"With all my heart I hope so, Raoul," said he.

XII

DONNA BIANCA

VITTORIA rode slowly home under the noon-day sun. It was hot and still, but she was not uncomfortable. She was unaware of external things. A little ragged admiring boy from one of the neighboring farms saluted her, sitting by the roadside, with a "Mornin', ma'am!" but she did not hear him. A wagon clattered by, raising a cloud of dust in which her horse tossed its head and sneezed, but Vittoria was unconscious of discomfort. Her attention was within.

Arrived at Standish, she found that it was almost luncheon-time, and so, after a very hasty toilette, went down to the table without changing out of her riding-skirt. Greatly to her relief, Pender Fleming did not appear. He often lunched alone in the room where he had spent most of his waking hours for the past twenty years, and on such occasions he merely sent word that he would not be at the table, without giving any reason for it. Vittoria sometimes wondered what the reason might be, but Pender was not the sort of man of whom one asks unnecessary questions, and, besides, she did not much care. Her

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father's presence at the table was so silent and funereal a presence that, without being quite aware of it, she was glad when he stayed away.

The state of terror and excitement in which she had rushed from Cedar Hill to throw herself, as it were, at Beau Temple's head was gone from her entirely, and her mind was altogether occupied with what she had done, and the definite and irrevocable step she had taken. She was not sorry for her action, though she wished it could have been managed in some less headlong fashion. She was glad of it. But few people take a step which is to decide the whole future course of their lives without finding themselves beset by some qualms—fears—doubts—some rather terrifying sense of the finality of what they have done. Vittoria felt a curious and, in its intensity, unprecedented sense of loneliness. It seemed to her that she was quite pathetically alone, that she had no one to go to for counsel or sympathy at this time when, of all times, she needed a shoulder to weep upon, though there was nothing to weep for. She was, by nature as well as by force of circumstances, a very self-reliant young person, but she found herself suddenly quite limp and miserable, and she thought she would like to cry, and she was conscious of a bitterly passionate longing for her mother. More than ever before in her life, more than all the other times put together, she wanted a mother to cling to.

She finished the uncheerful, solitary meal, and afterward took a book—the *Pragmatism* of Professor

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William James—out upon the shaded terrace, where she had a comfortable deck-chair. She remained there until late afternoon, then made her slow way up toward her own chamber; but on the stairs the housekeeper, a stout, red-cheeked woman of middle age, halted her with a question. Plumbers were at work in the house, it appeared, and, in tracing the course of some leaking water-pipes along the attic floor, found themselves halted by a small storeroom to which the housekeeper found she had no key.

"The key must have been lost some way, Miss Vittory," she apologized. "I can't think how, and I don't like to bother the master to find out if he has one. Do you think we might take the door off its hinges? The room's of no importance. I just remember that there's trunks and boxes and such in it—from away back. The men could put the door back in good order once they've found out about the pipes." Vittoria nodded indifferently, saying:

"Oh yes, I dare say. It can do no harm, I should think. I'll go up with you, if you like." She was pathetically glad of the chance to give her mind to any such trifle.

"Ah now, that 'd be real kind of you, miss," the housekeeper said. "It takes the blame of it off my shoulders like. We sha'n't be long."

They found the working-men in the dim attic at bay before the locked door. Vittoria gave them permission to go on, and they very soon had the door off its hinges and set aside. The room within was

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very dusty, for no one had been there in years, and it smelled of long confinement and of the dust and of dry decay. At one end were a number of pieces of furniture—bedroom furniture it seemed, half concealed under covers of linen—and about the floor stood trunks of an old design, and packing-cases, and ornamental jars of Chinese porcelain, and various other decorative ornaments. It was as if an entire room—a bedroom very luxuriously fitted—had been stripped long ago and its contents locked up here.

Vittoria glanced about her with a faint and absent surprise. The significance of these things did not reach her dulled sensibilities at all. But the housekeeper looked at her swiftly, and away again, pursing up her broad lips in a grotesque and soundless whistle. The woman had not been above ten years in that house, but she must have heard servants' and neighborhood gossip, and she must at this moment have had her surmises.

A number of large paintings in tarnished frames were stacked at one side of the room, face to wall, and one of the workmen, burrowing about his business, dislodged this stack so that the outermost canvas fell over upon its back on the floor. Vittoria, in a mood of idle curiosity, stepped forward to see what the painting might be, but, when she saw it, gave a sudden low cry of sheer amazement, and stood staring. The red-cheeked housekeeper moved up behind her mistress's shoulder, looked, and also

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cried out. The picture on the floor appeared to be a life-sized portrait, very finely rendered, of Miss Vittoria Fleming. It might have been painted yesterday, or the week before, or the month, but not prior to the girl's advent in New York and her discovery of the infinite possibilities in the matter of garments and hair-dressing.

"Whoever can it be, miss?" the red-cheeked housekeeper cried at last, amazement and something like fear in her protruded eyes. "Lord save us, miss! Whoever can it be?"

"It is my mother," said the girl, without emotion. "My mother, who died nearly twenty years ago. . . . Ask two of these men, please, to carry it down to my room." The woman turned and stared at her fearsomely.

"But the master, miss!" she said, whispering, as if Pender Fleming might lurk behind trunk or packing-box.

"What will he say, miss?" she protested. Vittoria's eyebrows went up a very little.

"Please ask two of these men to carry the portrait down to my room," she said again, and the woman turned and gave the order.

Below, in her great square chamber that looked to west and south, she locked the door, and, slightly dampening a towel, wiped the painted canvas free of the dust of twenty years. The working-men, under her direction, had set the portrait across the arms of a huge colonial chair, so that it leaned securely

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against the chair's back. It was near the westward windows, and the low late sun shone mildly in upon it, touching the colors with life and fire.

The woman in the picture sat upon a carved oak settle, leaning forward out of her tarnished frame, one very perfect arm laid along the back of the settle, the other across her knees. She was dressed in a satin evening-gown of yellowish ivory tones, and there was nothing in the costume to indicate the fashion of any particular period. It was very plain, with long, sweeping lines that clung to or followed the woman's figure. Also her hair was not done in the fashion of her day, but in a style oddly similar to that which Catharine Dudley's coiffeur had decided upon for Vittoria Fleming, and which lent to that maiden a part of her striking resemblance to the celebrated operatic lady.

Beyond this, the likeness between Donna Bianca Fleming, who sat in her gilded frame, and Donna Vittoria, her daughter, who knelt upon the floor before it, was amazing. The girl might have been looking into a mirror.

In the year '84 the world lost a great genius when a certain young Polish painter was killed in a railway accident between Paris and Versailles. His name is forgotten now, for in quantity the sum of his work was small, but for the two or three years before his death he was probably the most conspicuous figure living in the field of portraiture. Unlike most of his contemporaries, he painted

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very boldly, with an effect of bravura such as one may see in Franz Hals long before and in Mr. John Sargent at the present day. But the Pole did more. It used to be said of him, as of Herr Lenbach, that he reduced his conception of a subject to a single idea—to a single expressive word, as it were—and so painted a mantle of flesh and drapery round this conception. Certainly the portraits which he left behind him seem to bear out the tale, and, among them, none bears it out more astonishingly than the last portrait which came from his brush.

In Bianca Fleming the Pole seems to have seen one thing above all things, and that thing spoke, after twenty years, from the painted canvas with a flame-like vividness which was poignant beyond words—a passionate prayer for life and love and happiness. In the mother the Pole saw and realized and painted it, in the daughter Richard Blake saw it with his first glance, and feared for it and thrilled to it—Bianca Cornaro's heritage to her child.

Vittoria, kneeling on the floor close beside the big arm-chair, looked into the beautiful face of the mother who had come to her, as it were, by a miracle, and a sort of silent speech seemed to pass between the two—speech more intimate than any spoken words could possibly be. And after a little while the girl laid her arms out upon the seat of the chair, bent her head over them and began to weep, but not for grief—the tears that come to women and to children in time of stress, bringing blessed relief and comfort

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and peace. For tears are much more literally a safety-valve than most people know.

But when she had done with her pleasant and comfortable weeping—had sobbed away, as it were, all strain and nervous excitement—Vittoria raised her head once more to meet her mother's eyes. She was amazed beyond all expression at the astonishing resemblance between Donna Bianca and herself, for that was something she had not been prepared for. And she was touched by it too. It seemed to create at once a sort of intimacy between them. She realized that if her mother had proved to be an altogether different type of woman, however lovely, she could not have felt for her the immediate sense of sympathy and kinship with which her heart was now overflowing. Her joy had still the keen edge of pain, because now, more than ever before, she realized what the two might have been to each other if Donna Bianca had lived, but she was too glad to regret very much—too overcome by gratitude at the miracle which had befallen her.

She sat back upon her heels and looked a long time, with a soft and tender gravity, into the eyes of the woman in the portrait. A fanciful conviction began to grow in her that her mother was trying to speak, she leaned forward so eagerly from her tarnished frame, her eyes were so wistful, her red lips parted in the very beginning of speech.

It was not at all as absurd as it sounds, for almost any one will become seized by that eerie sensation if

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he stands a long time before a well-rendered portrait whose subject is not at rest, but in a pose of animation. Vittoria, without knowing it, was slowly hypnotizing herself by one of the most commonplace methods, and as she knelt there, looking into her mother's eyes, she became very still until she was almost rigid, her gaze became more and more fixed and immovable, and her face took on an eager, receptive expression—the expression of one who listens very intently—until it was drawn in lines that were almost painful. It seemed to her, in so far as she was capable of thought, that, if she waited and waited and listened and was still, those eager, parted lips must at last speak to her—tell her what it was they so longed to tell—the secret behind her mother's shadowy, wistful eyes. And once her own lips parted for a brief sound of whispered speech. She said:

“Oh, what is it? What is it you want to say to me?” So they sat there together, these two women who were so astonishingly alike, and the strange semblance of a silent speech passed between them, while the sunlight died away, and the sunset colors paled from the west, and twilight stole into the room. Once a servant knocked at the door, asking if her mistress would come down to dinner, but Vittoria did not answer. It is doubtful if she even heard.

And so twilight deepened to dusk, and imperceptibly the night came on. Then, when it was dark and eyes could no longer see, Bianca Fleming left her tarnished frame and crept closer to the

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daughter who knelt waiting, closer in the enveloping darkness—a warm and fragrant presence, a very human woman whose soul, as Vittoria knew afterward, had cried out for love and understanding, and who, in the end, had had the courage to take love to her heart in the face of a contemptuous world.

XIII

IN THE WALLED GARDEN

EARLY on the next morning Vittoria, accompanied by the faithful and sympathetic Mr. Hennessy, went for a walk. She had had rather a bad night, obsessed by dreams beautiful and thrilling and cruelly sweet. That does not sound like a very bad night, but the dreams were forbidden dreams, and the dim remembrance of them remained to haunt and frighten her after sleep was done. She had, moreover, two or three matters to think of, and it was her habit to save up such things—like a dog with a bone—until she could take them out into the open solitude and there go over them carefully. Most women do that.

There was first, of course, the matter of Richard Blake, and of what was to be done about him if he chose to remain in the neighborhood. And, secondly, there was the matter of that curious little revulsion of feeling, the instinctive shrinking from Beau Temple on the day before, when she thought he was going to take her in his arms and kiss her. She had been unaware at the time that the feeling had expressed itself in action, but afterward, when she thought of it,

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she wondered if she had not really drawn away from him—as, indeed, she had; for the feeling had been quite strong enough for that. It puzzled and a little alarmed her. She had never shrunk from him before, not even when, in imagination, she had looked forward to their marriage, and she wondered why that sudden and strong sense of repulsion should have swept and mastered her. Also she wished to reflect at leisure upon Temple's friend, the blind Frenchman with the beautiful face and the singing voice. She thought that she had never met or seen any one in the least like him, and the man interested her very much. He would have interested her for his own peculiar qualities—the old-fashioned courtesy, and the color of romance, and the sound sweetness of him—quite apart from the oddly intimate conversation into which the two had fallen during Temple's absence in the house, but the conversation was so uncommon that it was unforgettable. It is not usual for strangers—an old man and a young girl—to begin to discuss the meaning of life within ten minutes of their introduction. Vittoria had tried to remember how it was, by what chance word, the talk had fallen upon such lines, but that had gone from her. She remembered only what they had said afterward, how she had quoted a phrase from a book recently read, to the effect that life at its best is but a series of compromises. And she remembered how De Coucy had cried out upon that:

“Ah no, mademoiselle! Not for you who are

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young and have life before you! We old ones have lost all that we had through that. Never compromise, mademoiselle! Never compromise! That sort of wisdom is cowardice. Be brave! Take your life into your hands and go forward. Do not make compromises!"

It was strange advice for an old man who had lived long in the world to give to a young girl whose life, as he said, was all before her, but the blind Frenchman gave it very seriously and without hesitation. And it remained in the girl's mind, word for word, and troubled her a little.

So she went out upon the hills alone with the little Irish terrier, taking these three matters with her to reflect upon, but, important to her as they were, she found it extraordinarily difficult to focus her mind upon them. She found herself in a state of mental apathy—not the apathy of fatigue, but of pleasant and lazy inaction. It was a very beautiful morning, sunny and bright, but cooled by a little gentle west wind. Vittoria stood still on the hill-slopes and filled her lungs with that sweet and aromatic air, pungent with the breath of balsam pine from a near-by grove. She stretched out her strong young arms to the splendor of the perfect day, and was conscious of a state of extravagant bodily well-being. She had no desire to walk any farther, and anything like mental effort was profoundly distasteful, even to contemplate. If she had been a cat she would have found a very comfortable place in the grass, and she would have

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lain down there, tucked her fore-paws under, and purred. Not being a cat, she turned about and began to walk slowly homeward, and she dismissed from mind the three important matters upon which she had come out to reflect as easily and as completely as if they had been the three most trivial things in the world.

She seems to have summed up her mood rather neatly in a single observation which, as they sauntered along toward Standish, she made to Mr. Hennessy. She said:

"I wish I were a man and could smoke a pipe."

When she reached home she went toward the kennels, with the vague idea of letting all the dogs out at once, just to see what would happen. But presently she thought better of that, and turned away. She went on past the house and into the gardens, which lay to the westward. They were rather large gardens and exceedingly well kept, in an informal, old-fashioned way. The head gardener, who was a Bavarian, took much pride in his work, though his master never seemed to be aware that there were any gardens on the place at all.

Vittoria went in between the two rough stone gate-posts and down the neatly kept, box-bordered path to the central pool, which was fed by a spring, and overflowed in three little waterfalls into another pool on the broad terrace below. She stood a moment by the stone margin of the pool, and a score of little goldfish came and stared at her with big

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eyes, thinking they were about to be fed. Mr. Hennessy backed away, growling resentfully, for he had once been beaten for fishing, and Vittoria laughed at him, and they went on round the water, and so by a trellised path to the lower level, and finally to the girl's own special property, the little enclosure shut in from all the rest by high brick walls.

The ancient walls were crumbling and the iron gate hung awry, but within all manner of delectable things grew in a tangle (to the Bavarian's despair), and there was a fountain with a broken spout and a cracked stone margin, there were two benches sadly overgrown with moss, and there was even a sun-dial which a certain sleek and pensive tabby cat had chosen to sun herself upon. The enclosure hung upon the brow of an out-thrust spur of that plateau whereon the house and garden of Standish were perched, and from its farther wall the ground dropped away gently to the plain below. One saw a portion of the distant straggling village, with its three church towers, and the line of the railway.

Vittoria broke off a bud from one of the early roses which were just coming untimely into flower, and looked down upon herself for a place to fasten it; but there were no buttonholes in front, and she had no pins save those urgently employed. In the end she stuck it in her hair behind one ear, and immediately looked more than ever before like the well-known operatic lady—in the rôle of Carmen.

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She sat down upon one of the mossy benches and pulled off her flappy hat, for she was in shade there—the shade of a tall cedar of Lebanon which grew just outside the old brick wall and leaned obligingly inward.

Mr. Hennessy, doglike, rushed from corner to corner of the place and worked himself up into quite a fever of zeal over some imaginary quest, but the quest seemed to come to nothing, for as suddenly as he had begun it he gave over, and remained for a long time quite still and rigid at the foot of the sun-dial, glaring up at the somnolent tabby cat, who blinked contemptuously back at him. But Vittoria made herself very comfortable in one corner of the stained old bench, and closed her eyes in a placid content very like the tabby cat's. The same mood of pleasant apathy of which she had been conscious earlier was still upon her. It is an afternoon feeling, really—a summer afternoon feeling—and everybody knows it perfectly well; but it came to Vittoria in the morning, and she was so peaceful and contented that she no longer even wished to be a man with a pipe to smoke.

The air was both warm and cool together, and as soft as perfumed silk; there was no sound from anywhere save the little plashing sound of the water as it dropped down in miniature cascades from pool to pool, and at times the far-away lowing of a cow. But abruptly, in the midst of that gentle peace, Mr. Hennessy growled, faced about toward the gate, and

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growled again. After a moment he advanced a few stern paces and began to bark. Vittoria opened her eyes and said: "Bother! Who's coming?"

It was not the old gardener, for Mr. Hennessy allowed that faithful being to come and go without comment, so she thought it must be Beau Temple. At first she was aware of a faint regret—the wish that he hadn't come—a feeling that she was not quite ready for Temple; but no sooner had the feeling made itself known than, to put the thing fancifully, she flew at it, denying it with a quite disproportionate anger. She said that she was *always* ready for Beau—always! Always eager and glad of him.

Footsteps came down the gravel path, crisp and firm, so then she was sure it was Temple, and called to the terrier.

"Hennessy, stop that noise! Don't be a little fool!" She heard a laugh, the crazy iron gate swung open, and Richard Blake came into her garden.

She knew that she gave a little smothered cry, and afterward she knew that it had been a glad cry, coming from somewhere very deep within her, deep down under those feelings over which her consciousness held sway—the bottom of the well, perhaps. And so it may be that the sweet enchantment of those forbidden dreams was still faintly upon her. It may be that the mood of the morning had been a sort of preparation for this meeting—had softened her for it.

She got to her feet, and Blake held her hand in

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his—so she must have put it out toward him. From a great distance she heard him explaining how he had been in the near neighborhood on a morning's exploration, and, despite the hour, had dared take advantage of her permission to call. Vaguely she heard him say that he had been sent down from the house by the stable-boy who had taken the horse, and had seen his mistress go into the gardens; and, vaguely still, she heard him say civil things about her roses; but the words meant very little to her—half-heard phrases when the mind is elsewhere.

While her voice repeated, machinelike, the customary banalities in answer—"Do you think so? . . . Yes, we find it pretty," or such like nonsense—it seemed to her that, within, she was struggling for tangible grasp upon the realities—the new realities—which bounded and determined her life. And it seemed to be curiously difficult to reach them. By all obvious rights and settled determinations she should have met Mr. Richard Blake with a cool and distant and very discouraging indifference—not with frozen anger as on the day previous, only with indifference, but there was no force in her to compel the mood. Rather, perhaps, there was nothing in the man to evoke it—or perhaps it was both these things.

He faced her with grave and tender eyes—eyes that she had seen twice before, once in a ball-room and once in a park, and she had never forgotten them as they were, with that look in them, and she knew that she never would forget them, however hard she

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might try and however long she might live. The man's bearing completed upon her the enchantment which those forbidden dreams had begun, the sweet and fragrant morning had continued. She could not meet him with indifference. Still, for one brief instant, she faced something like peril and knew it for what it was, but she closed her eyes and thrust the thing away—rather furtively. She said to herself that there was no peril for her. Was she not safe from all perils—at anchor in a still harbor? She leaned upon the thought of her engagement (rather hastily to change the metaphor) as upon a firm rock, immovable in its security.

She became aware that neither she nor Blake was speaking, and she flushed and made a brief sound of laughter.

"Why don't you say something?" she demanded. "Haven't you any conversation at all?" And at that he echoed her laughter and said:

"I talked prodigiously a few moments ago, but you had the air of paying no attention to me, so I decided that I must have interrupted a train of thought and I was abashed. Were you thinking of something very interesting when I burst in upon you here?" She shook her head after an instant's reflection.

"No. I don't think I was thinking at all. I think I was just purring. Was I absent-minded with you? That's very rude, and I apologize. Probably I was half asleep when you came." She sat down

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again in one corner of the moss-grown bench, but the man remained standing before her and Mr. Hennessy stood near, fixing the stranger with a stern and distrustful eye.

"I'm very glad," Blake said, "to see you at last with your own surroundings—here at Standish. Do you remember telling me about Standish when we first met?"

"Yes," said she, nodding. "Yes, I remember—at that dance. I seem to remember that I was rather solemn and absurd. I don't quite know why."

"I don't seem to remember that," he answered, "though my memory is good. I remember that I wanted to hear a good deal more, but—I saw you so few times."

That was an unfortunate thing to say, and he regretted it almost before the words were out. It brought a flush to his cheeks and a frown to his brows, but Vittoria did not see, because she kept her eyes down. She spread her two hands out upon her lap and regarded them carefully, as if for some reason she were critical of them, but the man's speech left her unembarrassed and unafraid, and she was mildly surprised at herself.

"Three times altogether," said she, "not counting yesterday. I refuse to count yesterday, because I was in a vile humor and probably insulted you. Didn't I?"

She looked up at him for a swift instant, but at

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once looked down again, because, even now, she could not meet his eyes quite calmly.

"And that brings me to something I've never had a chance to say—well, yes, I had a chance yesterday; but then that vile humor, you see! I've never had a chance to say how very grateful I was, and am, for what you—what you did for me. You really saved my life, you know. Of course, men hate to be thanked. I know that—but I can't let you go on thinking that I took it too lightly—didn't realize how serious it was. If I'd seen you afterward—" She broke off there, because she was getting back to that dangerous matter of the man's deliberate neglect, and she looked up and, as it were, finished her sentence with a smile. But she looked no higher than Blake's chin.

He made a little movement before her. She had the odd impression that he was "squaring himself," as the phrase goes—spreading his feet for a firmer stand, as if he were on board ship in a seaway. He said:

"May I explain something to you?" He went on rather hastily, and without waiting for an answer, as if he were afraid of being stopped:

"When I left you that day in the Park—when you rode away with Monty Bellingham, and I went back home—I fully expected to call at Mrs. Dudley's in the afternoon. I meant to let nothing in the world interfere. Well, about four o'clock I had a telephone message from an old aunt of mine, asking me to come

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at once to her house on a matter of great importance. I went there, still expecting to go on at once to Mrs. Dudley's, but I found my aunt, who is a nervous old soul, frightfully worried about some absurd business matter that her lawyers had communicated to her. It took me nearly two hours to convince her that she wasn't on the verge of complete ruin. Well, then I rushed to your house—to Mrs. Dudley's—hoping that I might still find you, but I was told that you and Mrs. Dudley had gone up to dress because you were dining early—for the theatre. The next morning the same legal tangle that my aunt had got into took me to Washington, and there I stuck for a week or more. The day after I returned to town I went early to the Farings, with the idea of going on to you at a more respectable hour. Béatrix told me that you had left for Standish. And so that's why I never saw you again. Please say you understand!"

Vittoria remained with her head bent, still looking down at her two hands outspread in her lap, and she did not answer at once. But presently she said:

"Of course I understand. It's plain enough. But you speak as if I'd been attacking you—browbeating you for not coming to call upon me. I haven't, have I? You speak as if I'd been accusing you of staying away on purpose." She spoke in that perfectly colorless tone which people use when they are trying to hide what they really feel, and the man gave a sudden exclamation that was almost like a cry. It

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seemed to be the outburst of something intolerable. His hands moved stiffly for a moment at his sides, and he put them behind him, and gripped them together there.

"I did stay away from you on purpose!" he said, and at that Vittoria finally looked up to him, at first with sheer astonishment in her eyes, afterward with a still gravity. And she did not take her eyes away. His face was as it had been when he saw her in danger, when she had opened her eyes and seen it bent close over her.

"I did stay away from you on purpose!" he said again, and she knew that he was speaking words torn from him by sheer stress of feeling—true words that he had tried not to speak.

"Not then," he said. "Not that last time—that couldn't be helped—but before. I didn't dare see you. I thought that if I made myself stay away I would forget you. I was a fool! I was a fool! I knew in the very beginning—in that first hour I knew what you—were to me—must always be, but I fought against it. I wouldn't confess the truth even to myself. I wanted to be free. I was a fool!" He threw out his arms, open, in a queer, awkward gesture, and he was breathing hard.

"Surely you knew!" he said. "You saw. You understood. Women—they always know these—You knew why I stayed away?" He began to tremble quite absurdly, but it did not seem absurd to him, for he stood cold and shaken and frightened,

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like a man half-anæsthetized, or who has received a violent blow. He had not in the least meant to come to ultimate conclusions with this headlong abruptness. The words had said themselves. Out of a moment's despair, at what he conceived to be her unbelief, they had burst prodigiously—without intention, without plan, without coherence—rather like the bursting of a dam. He stood among the surge of them, aghast at what he had done.

Vittoria got to her feet before him, white-faced, with burning eyes. She did not know that she had made a movement. She was conscious only of some bewilderment and of a strange physical distress. The air had become suddenly hard to breathe, so that she gasped for it a little, and she had the sensation of being bathed in something powerfully electrical. It was not pleasant at all; it was painful, and rather terrifying. But through that fiery haze she heard the man's voice, flat and unnatural in tone. He said again—or the words said themselves:

"You knew why I stayed away?" And Vittoria answered him:

"No! . . . I was a fool too. . . . I didn't know." She wrung her hands.

"I didn't know!" she said. "Oh, I didn't know!"

Blake cried her name twice, and he took a step toward her, with outstretched arms. He was so near that one hand touched her. There seemed to be something magical in the mere physical contact, for quite suddenly that fiery cloaking mist which had

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enveloped the girl was rent away and she saw where she was. She shrank back from him, and, when he would have followed her, held up her hands to stop him. She said, in a stumbling, breathless whisper:

"No! No! Please stay where you are! . . . Wait!" She turned away and stood for a little space with her face bowed over upon her hands. The man waited, immovable. It was as if he had been frozen there—turned to stone.

Then, after a pause, Vittoria began to speak, hurriedly still, but without excitement. And she remained with her back toward him. She said:

"I should have told you—I meant to tell you, but you—all this came so suddenly—before I knew. I didn't realize what you were going to say. I am—engaged to be married to Beaumont Temple. I told him definitely, yesterday, that I would marry him, and I shall keep my word." She turned half about, and her head, with its dark hair and the rosebud against it, was uplifted proudly, but she did not look at Richard Blake. She said:

"I love him. I want you to understand that. I want to marry him. I shall be very, very happy all my life. I have known him always, and I trust him and respect him more than any one else in the world—and love him. I am proud to love him. . . . I—please—" She clasped her hands hard before her, and looked away.

"I am sorry—sorrier than I can say, to have let you say what you did. It seems cruel, but I truly

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didn't know. I give you my word that I didn't know. I had been—hurt by your staying away from me in New York, and I was glad, so glad, to hear you say that—that you—to explain why it was—that you had gone further than I should have let you go before I quite realized. I wish I thought you could forgive me.”

She took a few steps away, and stood before one of the rose-bushes. She began to break off the leaves and even the young buds from the top of the bush, but she did not in the least realize what she was doing. Mr. Hennessy came to her feet and began to whine. He knew that his lady was, in some obscure fashion, troubled, and his Irish heart was wrung with sympathetic woe. When she did not even look down to him he elevated his nose and emitted one long, dolorous howl. Then Vittoria hushed him and turned back.

Blake seemed not to have moved from his place, but his outstretched hands he had lowered and clasped again behind him. From his face the girl could tell nothing of what he might be thinking. He had not a great range of facial expression—quite the reverse, in fact. His eyes could be very eloquent: they could be cold and hard, with little glittering lights in them; or they could turn soft and very tender—and at such times they seemed to become darker than they really were and full of shadows; or, in certain moods, they could blaze with a sort of sombre fury that was as terrible as it was happily

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rare. But, apart from his eyes, the man's face expressed singularly little. In moments of stress it became very slightly pale and somewhat drawn and rather forbidding, though the stress might be of any kind at all.

Vittoria watched him anxiously, and waited for him to speak. And after a still moment, he said:

"Was there never any chance for me, then?"

"There was, once," said she. "But you wouldn't take it." And at that he gave an exceedingly bitter cry, and covered his face with his hands. Afterward he said to her:

"I cannot give you up. It is impossible—unthinkable. I have behaved throughout—from the beginning—like a madman, and I deserve to lose you, but I cannot face it. It's too much to me—everything—all my world! At least, I have loved you. Though I behaved like a lunatic, I have loved you from the first moment I ever saw you, and I cannot give up hope. I can no more give up hoping than I can give up breathing. It's impossible.

"I am quite aware," he said, "that most people would call it dishonorable for me to say these things to you when you have told me that you are engaged to marry another man, but it cannot harm you. It cannot possibly do you any harm to know that I love you, and have loved you all the little time I have known you."

Vittoria listened with uplifted face and closed eyes, her hands at her breast. It was the sweet, forbidden dreams come true. In her dream Blake had said that he loved her, that all the long period of neglect

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and seeming scorn had been a hideous mistake, and now he was saying it in the waking life, under the golden morning sun, and she could no more help thrilling to his words—exulting in them—than in those enchanted dream hours.

But when Blake's voice ceased she came to herself with a sudden start and opened her eyes. He was not looking at her; his head was bent, and his eyes fixed upon the ground before him.

She said:

"I'm not offended with you. In a sense—I'm glad to know. Both glad and sorry, perhaps. But there mustn't—we mustn't speak of it any more, must we? You must not make it hard for me." She said most of the trite and banal things that women, at such times, find to say—things well enough intentioned, meant to comfort: that he must try to forget her, put love for her out of his heart, go back to his busy, pleasant life. But the man shook his head sadly, saying:

"I think you know that I'm not the forgetting kind. It would be impossible." For an instant he awoke again to that fierce rebellion.

"I won't give you up! I tell you it's inconceivable! I cannot believe that you are lost to me forever!"

Then the neglected Mr. Hennessy began once more to bark, and Blake turned his eyes up the garden path. He said:

"Somebody is coming down from the house. Who is it?"

XIV

A MYSTERY EXPLAINED—VITTORIA MAKES A PROMISE

“IT is my father,” Vittoria said. “You’ve never met him, have you? No, of course! How very odd of him to be walking about in the garden! He seldom comes out of doors at all.”

Pender Fleming came down the gravel path, walking heavily, after his wont, for his gait was as uncouth as his shapeless body: there was no elasticity in him. His vast and pallid cheeks—they looked ghastly under the wholesome sunlight—shook a little as he walked, and the brim of his Panama hat shook too. He came through the iron gate, and paused there a moment to peer before him with narrowed eyes, for he was short-sighted. His attitude, with out-thrust, pendulous head, was oddly suggestive of those sullen beasts of prey who sit within cages at a show and stare dully at the passers-by.

Vittoria spoke to him, and he said:

“Ah, there you are! There you are! Is that you, Beau?” He began again to move forward with his short, heavy paces. The tabby cat, with friendly intent, leaped down from its place atop the sun-dial

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and got in the way of his feet. Pender kicked at it without looking down. He asked again:

"Is that you, Beau?" And Vittoria laughed, saying:

"Of course it's not Beau. It is—" She halted midway of her sentence for sheer amazement and alarm, for her father, advancing past the fountain pool, seemed at last to see clearly the face of the young man before him, and gave a sort of gasping, whispering cry. He had a stick in one hand, but he raised both hands before him as if he were frightened, and all his huge white face began to twitch and quiver in the most horrible way, as if he were in a fit of epilepsy.

Vittoria thought she heard him say:

"Oh, my God!" and, "After all these years!" But she was not sure of the words. She looked from her father to Richard Blake, and that young man seemed to be as astonished and as alarmed as she was. The thing was incomprehensible. She was a little frightened, but she moved closer to her father, and touched his arm, saying, anxiously:

"Are you ill? Are you in pain, father?" And when he did not answer her, she said:

"This is Mr. Richard Blake, who is staying with the Farings. You must help me thank him. He saved my life once, in New York. I never told you."

Pender Fleming raised the stick in a shaking hand.

"Get out of my garden, sir!" he said, in a hoarse whisper. He could hardly speak. Vittoria cried, sharply:

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"Father! Father!" And Richard Blake gave a little exclamation of astonishment and stared at the man who stood trembling before him, the cane waving in erratic circles overhead. He said:

"Yes, of course! Certainly, I'll get out of your garden if you say so, but I must know why. I was quite properly presented to your daughter by her cousin, Mrs. Dudley, and at present I am a guest of your daughter's friends; so, you see, I must be fairly respectable. I should like to know your reason for ordering me away. Men don't take that tone with one another without some excellent reason."

"Will you get out of my garden," said Pender Fleming, "or will you be beaten half to death and then kicked out?" He advanced a step, holding the heavy stick on high, but his arm shook uncontrollably, and the stick wavered from side to side in his hold. Blake made no movement to defend himself. He kept his hands down, and his eyes upon the elder man's eyes. But when Fleming spoke the second time and came a step forward, Vittoria sprang before him and caught his upraised arm. She cried out again:

"Father! Father!" And the man's arm dropped suddenly beside him as if he had been shot or struck a violent blow. Holding him with her two hands, Vittoria stared into his face.

"You must be mad!" she said, amazedly. "You must be quite mad. Who do you think this is? You're making some terrible and grotesque mistake."

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This is Mr. Richard Blake—Richard Blake. I tell you, he saved my life! You owe him my very life. Are you insane?"

"I know what I am doing," said Pender Fleming, in a thick voice. "I know who this—man is. He is Richard Blake, the son of Creighton Blake, and if he remains here before me very much longer I shall kill him with my hands." He gave a sort of sob.

"Go into the house!" he said, in his hoarse, whispering tone. "Go into the house at once! I must deal with this—this scoundrel, alone." But at that the girl drew back from him with an odd light in her eyes that Pender Fleming did not know. She stood beside the younger man, and laid her two hands upon him.

"Whatever you have to say," said she, "you will say to us both. I think you are a little beside yourself, and I know that you have hideously insulted my guest and your guest—insulted him beyond all pardon; but now that we three are together, you must give your reasons for—for the attitude you have taken. It concerns me as much as it concerns Richard Blake, and—I remain here."

"For the last time," said Pender Fleming to the man before him, and trembling very violently—"for the last time, will you leave my garden?" And Blake said, again:

"Not until I know why. For, on my word of honor," said he, "I am absolutely and entirely in the dark."

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"You lie!" cried Pender Fleming, in a chattering rage. "You lie, most damnably!"

For just an instant the younger man's head went forward and a deep flush swept over it, but he checked himself with a great effort.

"I said on my word of honor," he repeated. But Pender Fleming laughed discordantly.

"Honor!" he sneered, laughing. "A Blake's honor!" And then, as if he had come at last quite to the end of endurance and anything like self-control, he raised his arms to the bright blue sky, and a fit of raving and sobbing and cursing madness fell upon him, and he was as one possessed.

In the end, after, it may be, ten minutes of this, the man's contorted face went crimson and white again very alarmingly, and he swayed upon his feet and would have fallen prone but that Vittoria and Richard Blake caught him in their arms and eased the heavy body down upon one of the garden benches which stood near.

Over Fleming's bowed head they faced each other white and still, for those half-coherent ravings had told a very terrible story, and they knew that the story was so.

Vittoria's beautiful mother, the sweet and gentle mother who had, after so many years, become a living reality to her, had left her husband's house and the six-months-old child there, and had gone away. It was to Creighton Blake that she went, and she died in his arms a year later.

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Instinctively the mind of each of these two young people flashed back to those first meaningless and unheeded warnings.

"Catharine Dudley knew!" the girl said, in a soundless whisper. "That is why she tried to discourage me in the beginning. But, oh, why didn't she tell me the truth? Why? Why?"

And Blake, staring dumbly at the girl before him, said within himself:

"That was what my father meant! Good God, why couldn't he have told me?"

It never occurred to either of them to doubt the truth of what Pender Fleming had betrayed in his fury. The thing carried conviction with it. It was too terribly serious to be false. So they stood for a long time looking into each other's white face over the huddled and half-unconscious figure that crouched like a dead thing on the garden bench. But at last, as if the same impulse had stirred them both at the same instant, they moved a little distance away, toward the iron gate in the wall. The Irish terrier, seated on its haunches near by, regarded them with eyes of puzzled anxiety, and thumped its stub of a tail upon the garden path. Clearly, the air of that place was surcharged with trouble, and the small beast gave one short whine of anguish and began to shiver, as dogs do. Farther away the sleek and self-indulgent cat, which had skipped so indignantly from before the toe of Pender Fleming's boot, was skipping again, at play with the golden flecks of sun-

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light which the wind-stirred leaves above made to dance and shiver over the trodden earth.

Vittoria brushed her hand across her eyes, as one does awaking from sleep.

"I—can't think," she said, slowly, and frowning. "It is as if I were drugged or partly stunned. I seem to be unable to think at all." She broke suddenly into a fit of dry sobbing.

"My beautiful mother! My beautiful new mother! I cannot—believe. What shall I do, now, without my mother?"

Blake turned away from her, for he dared not look at the frank agony which was in her eyes at that moment. What the girl had said of herself was as true of him. He was too stunned to think with any clearness. The peculiar horror of the thing had come upon them too unawares. They were bewildered before it. Yet, through all the shock and horror of that hour, the man's first thought was for the girl he loved. It hurt him intolerably to see her so wrung by grief. He turned back to her in a sort of desperation, crying her name:

"Vittoria!" And neither of them knew that he used that name for the first time.

"Ah, please! please!" she said, covering her face. She said: "I cannot speak to you, just now. Afterward—I don't know. Will you please go away? I think you'd better go away." And he answered her, gravely:

"Yes. I understand. I'll go at once. First, though, I must look to your father."

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But when he turned to where Pender Fleming sat huddled in one corner of the garden bench, breathing hard, his heavy face suffused, his eyes all but closed, she moved after him, calm again, with dry eyes.

"My father has had these . . . seizures before," she said. "They are not dangerous, I believe. No, you can do nothing for him. Just call the gardener, please. He's outside the gate yonder. And tell him to send Jamieson. That is my father's man."

Blake did her bidding at once, and in an incredibly brief time Jamieson came, running silently—not as other mortals run, with obvious haste, but in a fashion quite his own—a small, thin-faced man with shifting eyes and the unnaturally neat manner of the body-servant. He looked once obliquely toward Richard Blake, and dropped upon his knees before the bench where his master sat. He must have gone always prepared for emergencies, for he at once drew from his pocket a little flask of lavender salts and held it to Pender Fleming's nose. The man began to cough and gasp and to roll his great head back and forth. Then Richard Blake bowed and went away, Mr. Hennessy barking triumphantly over the retreat, and Vittoria stood still in her place and watched him go.

The valet had dispatched the gardener for a certain invalid wheel-chair which was kept on the south porch of the house, and it came quickly, attended by the gardener and a boy hailed from the stables; but Pender Fleming cursed them all wearily, and would

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have none of such aid. He got, with some difficulty, to his feet, once turned a lowering glance toward the girl who stood near, and so, without a word, leaning heavily upon the shoulder of his body-servant, went away up the garden path out of sight. Vittoria was left there alone—save for the little faithful dog that shivered at her feet, and whined, and besought her with a timid, supplicating paw.

She sat down once more upon the garden bench and leaned back, closing her eyes. She was full still of a vast bewilderment, and the sick and stunned sense of loss irreparable. She wondered a little, dully, at the savage cruelty of the fate, chance, providence—whatever it was—which had given her her sweet and beautiful mother only to rob her again so dreadfully. That seemed to her so wanton a piece of sheer malevolence.

She sat there still for what was to her a measureless interval—but it cannot have been very long—not thinking much or reflecting with any clearness, only suffering—washed and submerged in grief and resentment and a sort of bitter, vicarious shame. But at last she roused herself and got to her feet.

“I must go to him,” she said. “I must go to my father.” The little dog frisked about her as she moved, barking joyfully and jumping up to lick her hand, but she went on, heedless, and entered the house. She made her way at once to Pender Fleming’s study and knocked. There was no answer, and she opened the door and went in. Her

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father sat in his arm-chair beside the big writing-table, idle, his arms hanging beside him, his chin on his breast. The valet was not in the room.

Pender looked up as the girl closed the door behind her, and he said, ungraciously:

"I would rather be alone." But Vittoria came where he was and stood before him. For the first time in her life she was not afraid of her father.

"You have been alone too long," said she. "You have been alone ever since I can remember. Don't drive me away now. I'm your daughter, after all. I'm all you have. It is time I began to be something more to you than a stranger—a sort of young guest in your house." She dropped down to the floor and laid her arms upon her father's knee. Over her Pender Fleming's vast face began to contort in strange grimaces, and tears began to roll down it—the terrible, hard-wrung tears of the stern man who seldom weeps. Vittoria hid her face upon her outflung arms, and presently felt her father's hand, heavy and awkward and trembling, on her head. After a little time she looked up to him and spoke.

"Why is it?" she said. "I am wondering why it is that you have kept me away from you all these years. I might have been so much to you, it seems to me. I was all you had, and you wouldn't have even me. You made me afraid of you, you know. I've always been terribly afraid of you. Why couldn't we have been like other fathers and daughters?"

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The man looked down at her and away. His lips moved, and he seemed to be trying quite grotesquely to speak—to explain—but he had forgotten how. He had been silent too long. Vittoria watched him with a tense eagerness, and saw the effort he made, and was both astonished and touched. A sudden light broke in upon her—a possible explanation—and she cried out:

“Was it,” she asked, “because I am—so like her—like my mother? Was it because I brought her back to you that you couldn’t bear to see me?”

That great pallid face began again to contort itself in dreadful grimaces, but the man controlled it. He nodded his head, looking away.

“Yes. It was that. . . . You don’t know, child. . . . A sort of miracle. Year by year . . . more like . . . I couldn’t bear it.” And she answered:

“Yes, I know. I’ll tell you how I know. I found my mother’s portrait yesterday. I was going to tell you about it when I had a chance. It was up in an attic room where some men were working at the pipes. Yes, I know.” At first she thought that her father was on the verge of one of his fits of anger, for the blood rushed to his face and suffused it, and during a brief instant his eyes darkened. But he covered his face with his hands and was still.

“I wish,” Vittoria said, very earnestly, “that I could make up to you even a little for what—they did so long ago—what my mother did. I wish that I could comfort you, somehow, but I see how it is.

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You can never even look at me without thinking of her—remembering. It is terrible.”

“Do you think I ever forget?” cried Pender Fleming, aloud. “Do you think that one hour passes of the day or night that does not bring her face to me, the sound of her voice—the—fright and hatred in her eyes? Do you? I tell you, I see her always. I sit here in this room, and she stands across yonder in the shadows and looks at me. And *he* comes there too! He comes! And she shrinks away from me with hate in her eyes—and I hear what she says to me—intolerable things—and she—turns to him, and they go away together.” The man began to tremble violently. He cried:

“I have lived in hell for nearly twenty years, and that man’s face has mocked me!”

Vittoria caught the hand which lay near her between her own hands and bowed her cheek upon it. She had fallen to trembling also, in sympathy with the tremors which shook her father’s great body so fiercely. She was very swift of comprehension, and she understood, as well as if the man had spoken at great length and with great eloquence, the ceaseless and enduring torture which had made him a sort of madman dwelling in the presence of his curse. After all, she was Pender Fleming’s daughter, though she bore no littlest outward resemblance to him, and that grim and deathless obsession of love and hate was far from incomprehensible to her.

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A thought came to her mind, and she looked up. She said:

"Is Richard Blake, then, so like his father? When you saw him in the garden you seemed to be—overcome before I could tell you who he was, and you cannot ever have seen him before, I should think—not for years, anyhow." She understood Pender Fleming to say, in a whisper, "Yes—very like! Very like!" And then she remembered that she herself had once had a glimpse of Creighton Blake.

"Of course! I saw the father once—at a ball in New York." She paused to reflect upon that man's haggard and grief-scored face.

"Yes, they are alike, but not so much alike as my mother and I. I saw him. . . . Do you know—" She looked up again with a certain curiosity. "Do you know I wonder that you let me run the risk of meeting Richard Blake? You must have realized that it was possible."

"Beaumont Temple," said her father, "told me that—the two were abroad. Else I should not have allowed you to go to New York." And she nodded at that.

"Yes, I believe they are abroad most of the time. The other—Richard Blake's father—is abroad now—in the Pacific islands, I think. . . . But how very dreadful that I should have met them—met that man's son, and never have known! He didn't know, either. You were wrong there. I am sure that he didn't know. His father must have kept it from

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him as you have kept it from me. He didn't know.

"There is a great deal that is strange in it—uncanny, now that I know. I begin to think there is something horribly fatal about it. Fate still working away . . . after all these years. . . . And I wonder why? Why?" Holding fast to his hand, she looked up oddly into Pender Fleming's bowed face.

"Do you know," she said, "I believe that is uncannily true—about Fate working still, after all these years. It is very strange, but Richard Blake quite blindly, quite ignorantly, seems to have done all that a human being could, by any possibility, do to make up for his father's wrong to you? He saved my life. I told you that, didn't I? I was thrown from my horse in the Park in New York, and by a sort of miracle he was near by when it happened. He was standing on a foot-bridge over the bridle-path, and he leaped down—a tremendous distance—and saved me when I was being dragged. I'm quite certain that I should have been killed if he hadn't come to help me." The girl's voice rose a little in her excitement, and she gripped Pender Fleming's hand hard between hers.

"Do you see what I mean? Creighton Blake took your wife from you, and his son has given you back your daughter's life—though he didn't at all know what he was doing. There must have been Fate in that. It's quite too strange just to have happened.

"Doesn't it—help a little?" she asked, almost

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timidly. "Doesn't it take away—a little of the bitterness? It seems to me very wonderful."

But the man drew away his hand with a sharp effort, and she felt that the violent trembling had once more come upon him. She looked up, and his white face was drawn with it—wrung and twisted.

"I would rather you had died!" cried Pender Fleming, in a terrible voice. He shook horribly from head to feet.

"I would rather you had died than owe your life to that man's son." Vittoria gave a little exclamation of horror and pain, and shrank a little away, but her father suddenly put out his hands, grasped her by the shoulders and held her fast. That white, contorted face blazed down upon her with a dreadful anguish, and his trembling shook her strongly.

"What is he to you?" cried Pender Fleming. "What is this son of Creighton Blake to you, that you sit with him in your own garden? Answer me!"

"He is nothing," she said. "Nothing. Please let me go. You hurt me!" But the man swept on, unheeding:

"He is his father's son—blood and flesh! Blake they are, both of them. They have torn my heart alive out of my body—despoiled me—robbed me of more than life itself. They have damned me in this world and all worlds to come—and you take the hand of one of them, smile upon him, laugh with him! I would rather see you dead here before me. I tell

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you I would rather see you dead! It is unthinkable!" He gave a sudden bitter sob.

"It needs only that you should tell me you have fallen in love with this Blake. Then I think I could at last curse God and die. It needs only that. So tell me, if it is true."

Vittoria wrenched herself free from the gripping hands and got to her feet, breathing stormily.

"I have already told you," said she, white and angry. "I have said that Richard Blake is nothing to me. He could be nothing to me, however I might feel, because I have promised to marry Beau Temple. I settled that definitely yesterday. In any case, when I think that he—that Richard Blake is the son of the man who wronged you so terribly—who robbed me of my mother, I—I cannot think of it calmly. I am bound to be grateful to him always because he saved my life, and I repeat that in doing so he did all that a human being could do to repair his father's sin, but—I hope I shall never see him again. I cannot bear to think of him." She spoke very earnestly, with all the emphasis she could give the words, and she meant what she said. The enormity of that ancient wrong loomed very high to her just then, as she looked upon the bleak and bitter wreck of a man before her and thought what it was that had crushed him. The very atmosphere of Pender Fleming's habitation was an atmosphere of deathless brooding grief, of implacable titanic hatred. It surrounded her, and she breathed it in.

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It was poisonous, like the vapor of a deadly drug. In that moment she hated Richard, the son of Creighton Blake, almost as bitterly as her father hated him.

"Promise me," cried Pender Fleming, eagerly—his passion would seem to have filled him with strange and grotesque terrors—"promise me that you will never see this man again. I cannot bear the thought of your even seeing him. Promise me solemnly and faithfully!" Vittoria shook her head.

"That," said she, "is a thing no one could promise. I might see him by accident at almost any time. He is staying in the neighborhood—though he may have the decency to go away now. And besides, in later life, it is quite probable that however hard we might both try to avoid it, we shall meet occasionally. If I marry Beau I shall not live always in the country, you know. I shall be in New York during the winter. You ask an impossible thing."

But the man was in no state to be reasonable. He got with a struggle to his feet, and stood trembling before his daughter. "You are trying to trick me!" he cried, excitedly. "You are trying to evade a promise. What are you hiding from me? What, I say?" He gave a sort of shout.

"Am I too late? Has it come, then? Is it true that you love him—this man? Answer me!"

"I have told you, twice," said she. "How many times must I say it?" She saw that her father was beside himself.

He seemed to make a violent effort at self-com-

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mand and became calm. He peered at the girl with a sort of grotesque cunning.

"Promise me, then, solemnly and faithfully, that you will never marry Richard Blake!"

Vittoria gave a brief laugh of angry scorn, and said:

"I promise." But he held her still with his eyes.

"Faithfully and solemnly?"

She frowned upon him.

"I have never yet broken my word," said she, "and I do not expect to begin now. I gave you the absurd promise you asked. It will add no force to it to pile up words. Still, if it is any comfort to you—yes, I promise faithfully and solemnly. It is all quite absurd and needless, you know." Then because she was angry and had borne about all she could bear, even from her father, she turned away without further speech, and left the room. Pender Fleming followed a little way after her, and he seemed to make a soundless effort to call her back, but the door closed in his face and left him standing alone.

XV

WHEN LOVE CALLS, ANSWER AND GO

AS she came out from her father's study Vittoria heard weird sounds ringing through the house, and so was aware that it was luncheon-time. The summons to this mid-day meal at Standish was perforce varied and elaborate. There was never any difficulty in finding the master of the house, but Vittoria might be almost anywhere in that portion of Connecticut, and running her to earth (or rather to food) often required the efforts of the whole staff of servants. Mr. Griggs, the elderly butler, attended, by established custom, to the in-door branch of the search. There hung near the door of the dining-room one of those dreadful strings of so-called Japanese temple-gongs, arranged more or less in a chime, with which most households have been at some period cursed, and each day at one o'clock Mr. Griggs, who had no music in his soul, performed patiently and unimaginatively upon this horror with a little muffled stick. It sounded like some one learning to play the xylophone.

Vittoria heard these unlovely sounds, and called out hastily that she was coming. Mr. Griggs left off

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his musical labors to knock at Pender Fleming's door, but returned presently, saying that the master would not appear. So Vittoria sat alone at the table for half an hour trying to force herself to eat something, and found that it was well-nigh impossible in her overwrought state of mind and body. Few people can eat under such conditions as these. Still, the very peace and quiet of the familiar room, the cool silence about her, the commonplace ministrations, were very restful and relaxing, and before she had risen from the table she found that she was calm once more and free from the excitement which her father's bitter frenzy had communicated to her. She looked back over that strange interview, and was amazed and a little frightened when she realized to what a nervous pitch she had been wrought up. It was the first time within her memory that she had given way to unrestrained bitterness of thought and speech, and she was ashamed of it, though she knew well enough that it had been only the reflex of her father's incredible fury. She had made a solemn promise, too, which was to cover the whole period of her future life, and while it seemed to her a perfectly foolish and absurdly unnecessary promise, still a solemn promise is a sobering thing when one expects to keep it, and Vittoria reflected upon it gravely. The thought brought Richard Blake back to her, not unnaturally, and she found that now, away from her father's blazing eyes, the thought was by no means so intolerable as it had been. After all, what she had

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said to Pender Fleming was quite true. The young man had done, though ignorantly, all that was possible to make up for his father's sin. There was no blame which could attach to him in that sorry matter of twenty years past.

Vittoria went slowly up-stairs, meaning to change into a riding-skirt. At the door of her chamber she halted with a sudden pang, for she remembered that there was one within whom she must face in the light of new and terrible knowledge. She stood there before the door for a long time, with bent head and her hands hanging at her sides. But in the end she went in and closed the door behind her. She went straight across the room to the mantel over the fireplace, where, early that morning, she had had the portrait set in place, though it was not yet fastened to the wall, and she looked up very gravely, without shrinking, to meet her mother's eyes.

Again, as on the evening before, the strange resemblance of a silent speech seemed to pass between the two, but it must have been plainer speech this time, for much that was in the eager and wistful gaze of Donna Bianca Fleming was now comprehensible to her daughter. The girl must have known now, in part—though not all—what it was her mother strove so hard to say to her.

She looked into that beautiful face, striving, for her father's sake, to find there some trace of cruelty, treachery, deceit—some trace of the woman who would wreck the life of the man who loved her, out of

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selfishness, caprice, hurt pride. She could find nothing of all that in Donna Bianca's face, nothing: only sweetness, and pain, and long-suffering, and a passionate longing for love and life. She bent her head and recalled the face of Creighton Blake, seen for one long moment across a ball-room floor, and, for her father's sake, tried to find therein some trace of the jeering libertine, the despoiler of homes. It was a haggard face, she remembered well, one to fix itself indelibly upon the memory—a face worn by incredible grief—a haunted face, but there was nothing contemptible or vicious or cruel in it, only sorrow and a certain melancholy nobility—the face of a man who might love once disastrously in defiance of all law, but only once, and then with a terrible and a tragic intensity.

So the girl came at last to the third figure in that great romance of buried love and tragedy—the man who had sat alone in his dim room for twenty years, and remembered and hated. She looked upon him, for the first time, dispassionately, mercilessly, as if he were not her father, but a stranger to her. She pictured, in the light of her knowledge of Pender Fleming, the life which must have been led by those two together—Donna Bianca, all sweetness, light, love of joy, soft tenderness, and the stern, glowering, austere man under whose shadow she herself had passed her young life. Vittoria saw it, this pitiful existence, as if with physical eyes, as if it lay spread out before her, and she gave a great cry of sorrow and understanding, and bowed her head over her arms

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before her mother's portrait, and wept there for a long time.

When at last she composed herself and turned away it was with a curiously light heart. Her beautiful mother had again been restored to her, and, in the face of that wonderful fact, it seemed that nothing else in the world mattered very much. She knew vaguely that this must probably mean a further estrangement from Pender Fleming, but she did not wish to go into that at the present. It was enough that she had her mother back, within arm's-reach, and could love and idolize her without fear and without shame. She looked up once more into Donna Bianca's lovely face, and she said:

"Oh, my dear, I know. I know. And I'm glad you did what you did. I understand." Then, forgetting that she had come up-stairs to change into a riding-skirt, she went down again and out into the gardens.

She did not enter the brick-walled enclosure where she had been earlier that day, but sat down upon a shady bench beside the wide pool where the gold-fish swam, and she had not been there above ten minutes when she heard her name shouted from beyond the gate, and Beaumont Temple, in riding-clothes, swinging a horn-handled crop, burst in upon her. He said:

"Ah! there you are! I was afraid I'd missed you. Nobody knew, as usual, where you even might possibly be. What's the matter with Pender Fleming?"

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He refuses absolutely to see me. And he hasn't done that for years. Is he ill? What?"

"I'm afraid he's a good deal excited and wrought up, Beau," the girl said, as Temple sat down beside her. "I don't imagine he's ill, quite, but—something happened this morning, and then, afterward, father and I talked in his study, and—well, he worked himself up into a frightful state."

Temple said, "Ah!" And, after a moment, Vittoria went on:

"Some one—a man came here this morning to call on me, and father found us together in the gardens and had one of his rages. You know them."

Temple looked at her in silence, an interrogative silence, and presently she became aware that he did not wish to ask who the man was.

"The man was Richard Blake, Beau," she said, quietly. "And—I know, now, about my mother and—his father. It all came out to-day."

Temple turned and leaned forward, with his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped about his crop. He began to dig little holes in the earth and to make geometrical designs of great elaboration. After a while he said, as if to himself:

"I have always maintained that extraordinarily fanciful and dramatic things happen in real life. I have always maintained that. Certainly this thing—Creighton Blake's son! And you'd been away a few months only! There's something astoundingly

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poetic about it. Poor old Pender!" He looked up at the girl gravely.

"My beautiful mother!" Vittoria cried. "Oh, Beau, I understand so well, so well! I've found a portrait of her. I found it in a closed room in the attic, where it had been hidden away. And it's all in her face. All of it. She had to be happy. She was like that."

"Yes," said he, gravely, "she was like that. She had to be happy."

"And I hope she was!" cried Bianca's daughter. "I hope she had her one year of happiness and died in it—before she was ever sorry. Oh, I understand so well, Beau! I'm glad she did what she did. I'm glad of it!"

The man nodded without speaking, and for a time the two sat in silence. Temple went back to his earthworks, but gave that over and glanced up from it. Vittoria was looking across the garden enclosure to the red opposite wall, and, seemingly, through that and far away. Her lips were parted. She smiled very faintly, and the heavy lashes drooped over her eyes. Two flashes of golden sunlight came down upon her black hair, burning it to a sort of molten copper, and, as the leaves overhead stirred in the breeze, the spots of golden light shivered and played as if the molten copper were alive like quicksilver. They made a splendid halo round the girl's splendid head, and a little pang shot through the heart of the man who sat watching. It seemed to

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him that he had never seen her so magnificently beautiful, not even on that first evening after her return home, and her near presence had never before stirred him so. He watched the lashes that drooped over her eyes and the little smile that was at her lips, and a sudden spasm of jealousy wrung him, for he knew that her thoughts were very far away in that strange past, and that nothing he could conceivably say or do would ever make her smile in just that fashion.

He had often chaffed with Vittoria about his advanced age without any seriousness at all, for he neither looked nor felt even the four-and-forty to which he was entitled, but in this hour he suddenly felt old and tired and very far away from this beautiful child who had all at once become a woman. The realization came to him with a sense of dull pain, a sort of bitterness, and he closed his eyes for a moment and took a long, deep breath which was a sigh. The sigh seemed to waken the girl from her dreaming, for she turned with a start, saying:

"Beau!"

"Yes, my dear," said he, gently.

"Beau," she said, "could you tell me more about her—now? About my mother, I mean. Were you here when it—when she went away?"

"No," he said; "I had been abroad for nearly a year at that time. I returned almost immediately after it happened." He gave a sudden exclamation, and Vittoria looked up at him.

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"But there is some one who was here," he said. "I had almost forgotten. My housekeeper, Mrs. Callahan—Maggie Callahan—was at Standish when you were born. She was one of Donna Bianca's nurses. When they went away—when your mother went away—Pender discharged every servant in the house and took new ones. He—couldn't bear to have the others about, I think. Mrs. Callahan came to me, and I took her for housekeeper. You've seen her there for years—all your life."

"Oh, Beau," the girl cried, "if I could only talk to her! Do you think I might?"

"I don't see why not," said he. "You know the main facts now. I see no reason why Mrs. Callahan shouldn't tell you anything she remembers." He pulled out his watch and looked at it.

"Three o'clock!" he said. "Go and put on a riding-skirt, and I'll order your horse from the stable. We'll ride to Lone Tree Hill and interview Mrs. Callahan."

"Ah, you're a dear, Beau!" she said, springing to her feet. "You're a sweet dear! I sha'n't be ten minutes, so be off to the stable and have Sunrise saddled. I shall be ready as soon as you are."

She kept her word. She was not above ten minutes, and in fifteen the two were off down the drive at a sharp trot, and at Lone Tree Hill in half an hour.

Vittoria sat down upon the screened porch, and Temple went into the house. He was gone perhaps five minutes, and when he returned he was accom-

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panied by the old housekeeper, Mrs. Callahan, whom the girl had known since her childhood. The Irish-woman's eyes were round and excited, and she had a frightened air. She made an odd little bobbing curtsy to her master's guest, but Vittoria sprang up and kissed the woman on both cheeks, saying:

"How dare you be formal to me, Maggie Callahan? I'm ashamed of you! You, who used to give me cake and tell me stories when I came over here from home! For shame, Maggie Callahan!"

The woman grinned and her eyes twinkled, but it was a brief grin, and she was very obviously ill at ease. She looked toward her master over Vittoria Fleming's shoulder, and Temple nodded to her.

"I've told Mrs. Callahan," said he, "that you know the truth about your mother's going away, and that you want to know any little things she may remember of her and of that time."

"Yes—please, please, Maggie Callahan!" said the girl, and again the housekeeper made her little bobbing curtsy.

"It's little I do know, Miss Vittory," she protested. "Sure, I was there wid her—the poor lamb! I wint there for to nurse her whin ye was born, miss, an' I stayed for six months afther—ontil she—she wint away. But there's little I know, belike, that ye've not been told."

"Oh, any little thing!" cried Vittoria. "Any littlest thing that you remember. You loved her, didn't you, Maggie Callahan?"

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"Glory be!" said the Irishwoman, "I did that, miss. An' ivery wan that iver knew that blessed swate soul loved her. Ye couldn't help lovin' her av ye thried. An', so far as I know, no wan iver thried.

"I mind whin ye was bornn, Miss Vittory, an' how she bore ut all—a-beggin' yer pardon, miss, f'r speakin'!—wid niver a cry, but lay there wid a little white smile on the face av her. An' late that night, whin I was alone wid her an' she'd been asleep, she waked up sudden, an' says to me:

"'It's a strong, well child, Maggie dear?'

"I says:

"'A fine great girl, dearie, widout mark or blemish. A fine girl!'

"An' she says:

"'Praise God, I'll bring her up to be happy—happier than I have ever been, Maggie dear. That's what I want her to be,' she says, 'happy!—happy!' An' afther a little time she beckoned me closer to where she lay, an' she says, whisperin' slow:

"'Don't lit *him* come in!'

"'Lit who?' says I.

"'My—Misther Fleming,' she says, turnin' her swate face away on the pilla. An' I says:

"'He'll come in over me dead corpse,' I says. 'Niver fear, darlin'! Ye go along wid ye to slape an' lave me watch.' Ah, she was always a-beggin' that av me—askin' yer pardon, miss!—not to lit him come in. He froze her like, wid his sharp tongue an' his quare ways. She feared him."

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Vittoria nodded her head very slowly, and she said:

"Yes, I know—I know." And presently she said:

"When did you see them together first, Maggie Callahan, my mother and—Mr. Blake?"

"'Twas nigh two months afther ye was born, miss," said the housekeeper. "We was walkin' in the gaarden wan fine soft summer mornin', an' we kem to the shpot where there's a gate alongside that wood lane—the lane that leads north across the hills toward the ould Shaw house. There was some wan kem ridin' along the lane on a big gray horse, an' whin he saw us two a-standin' there he pulled up the horse an' sat still wid his eyes on yer mother, miss. I mind he dropped his ridin'-whip, an' I wint to pick it up for him. He thanked me like a gintleman, but he niver rowled his eyes, an' whin I kem back to yer mother she was starin' too, an' white. Misther Blake looked like he'd been at death's dure. His eyes had big black rings undher thim and his cheeks was thin. He says:

"'May I congratulate ye, Madonna?' That was the worrd he says. I remimber it. He says:

"'Ye have a treasure now.' An' yer mother looked up at him, an' she says, very slow:

"'An anchor, Tony, an anchor in time of sthress.' An' thin nayther av thim says any more, but afther a while Misther Blake bowed—ah, a fine, courtly gintleman he was, an' that handsome!—an' he rode away down the lane."

"And again?" said Vittoria, with her hands clasped

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together at her breast. "You saw them together again—after that?"

"Many times, miss. Sure, it was many times they was together in the gaarden—the little gaarden wid the ould wall round ut. Yer mother wud always have me there too, not far away. I dunno why. Ut may be—no, I dunno why. But I remimber wan time—the last time. Yer father—Misther Fleming—he kem there an' found thim—not that they'd been a-stealin' away to mate there. They did it open. But Misther Fleming he was always shut up in his lib'ry, an' maybe he didn't know. Maybe. Annyways, he kem that mornin', an' he was in wan av his black rages. The things he says was terrible. Wance I thought Misther Blake would lay hands on um where he stood, but yer swate mother, miss, cried out, an' he stepped away. Thin she bid him go—an' he wint, wid wan long luk back in her face. An' yer mother wint very slow up to the house wid her husband. . . . What they said lather I heard, but I cannot say all av ut to ye, Miss Vittory. He was still in his black rage, an' he did not pick an' choose his worrds. Wance, I mind, he says to her, the face av him white an' workin':

"An what kind av a woman do ye call yerself, thin?" An' she says, lookin' in his eyes:

"A slave, Pender. A slave waitin' for death. God send it soon!" says she."

Vittoria gave a sudden gasping sob, and Beaumont Temple came quickly forward.

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"That's enough, Vittoria," he said. "That's more than enough. This only pains you, and makes you suffer. It's all over, my dear, and done with, years ago. Let it rest." But the girl shook her head, saying:

"No, Beau! No! Let me hear it! Can't you see how I want to hear it? Can't you see how it makes me understand? Please go on, Maggie Callahan. Go on!"

The Irishwoman looked up at her master, but Temple shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

"Please go on," the girl begged. And after a moment the housekeeper said:

"An' that night he tuk the child away from her—her little child!

"'Ye're not fit to have ut in yer keepin',' he says to her. 'Ye're not the kind av woman to have an innocent child near to ye.'"

"I knew it!" cried Vittoria. "I knew it! I knew he must have done something like that! Please go on."

"She said little to 'm, the poor lamb! On'y sat an' looked on, wid her white face an' her big black eyes, but whin he was leavin' her, she says:

"'Be careful, Pender!—I warn ye!' she says. 'Ye're goin' too far this time. Ye've made my life somethin' very like hell,' she says, 'an' I've borne ut. But av there's any love left in ye for me, Pender, don't take my child away from me. Av ye do, ye'll be sorry.'

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“‘Ye’re not fit to have a child wid ye,’ he says ag’in; an’ she gave a little moan, wid her face bechune her two hands, an’ he wint out wid the child.

“So ut wint on for three days more, an’ she kipt to her room, niver stirrin’ out; but on the third night, whin I stole in to her, she was up an’ writin’ at her table. It was a letther she wrote, an’ whin she had sealed ut she gave ut to me an’ says:

“‘Take it to Benny the under-groom,’ she says. ‘Benny will know what to do wid ut.’ She put her head down on my shouldher for a minnut.

“‘I have borne all I can bear, Maggie!’ she says. ‘This is the ind.’ An’ I says nothin’ to her, for there was nothin’ to say.

“On the nixt night she wint. I helped her to dress warm and neat for the journey, an’ to put the few little things she needed into a bag. At the ind she says:

“‘Where is—my child?’ I had the key to the nursery, an’ I tuk her there. You were sleepin’ in your little bed, miss, an’ a night-light was near. The fat pig av a wet-nurse he’d sint for was snorin’ acrost the room. Yer mother bint over yer bed an’ kissed ye wance on the mouth, an’ ye didn’t wake. An’ she says, whisperin’:

“‘Good-bye, me tiny dear. God send ye a betther life than He sint yer mother! Grow up brave and strong,’ she says, ‘an’ whin ye’re grown up don’t lit anny wan choose for ye—choose for yerself,’ says she. ‘An’ whin Love calls, oh, answer!—answer an’ go!’

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"Thin she kem away an' we wint down through the house an' out, an' I wint wid her acrost the gaardens to the wood lane. He was waitin' there.

"An' she kissed me wance, an' they rode away."

Vittoria bent her head without speaking. After a little time she raised it again, and her eyes were very bright, but there were no tears in them. She took Mrs. Callahan's hands in hers, and kissed the woman's cheeks again.

"You were very, very good to my mother," said she. "I wish I could tell you how grateful I am, but I can't. Thank you very much for—telling me."

The Irishwoman looked toward her master, and she twisted her apron between her strong hands. Now that her tale was done the first embarrassment seemed to return upon her, so that she was flushed and ill at ease. Temple nodded to her, and she turned and went quickly into the house—for some obscure reason on tiptoe.

Then the man came forward, and Vittoria looked up at him with a little trembling smile.

"I'm sad—for the moment, Beau," said she, "with thinking what my mother suffered, but oh, I'm glad to know, because now I can be glad that she did what she did without even the littlest reservation or regret. I had thought and wondered about her leaving her child and going away. Now I understand. He had taken her child from her." The girl's face hardened to a sternness that Temple had

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never before seen there—it was a bit of the father in her—and she said:

“I can never forgive him that.”

“There is a great deal,” said Beau Temple, “that I shall never be able to forgive Pender for, but we mustn’t be too hard with him. Even knowing what we know, we mustn’t be too hard. Pender was always Pender, you know. He always had much within himself to contend with. He was austere by nature—cold, critical, awkward before any impulse of tenderness. He loved your mother very deeply, but he couldn’t show it. And he never understood a woman. They were as far apart as the poles, those two. Their marriage was a hideous mistake, and Pender made it more hideous. I can’t forgive him for what he did, but sometimes I pity him very much. He never had a fair chance.”

“Had my mother a fair chance?” the girl demanded. “Had she? I’m afraid I can never forgive him, Beau. It hurts me to say that, but it’s true.”

Temple watched her, and knew that it was indeed true. The young can be very cruel sometimes. He had a moment of curiosity, unusual with him, and asked:

“Did Richard Blake know the truth—about what happened long ago?”

“No,” she said. “No, he didn’t know—not until to-day. His father must have kept it from him, as mine did from me.” She looked up.

“I tried,” said she, “to make my father see how

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much Richard Blake did in reparation, even though it was unconscious, when he saved my life. But it only drove him to a greater fury. He was fairly beside himself."

"Beside himself?" queried the man. "About what? Ah, I see! At finding Mr. Blake with you—at finding that you knew him. Yes, of course."

She had a feeling that it was Beau's right to know everything that had passed, and she told him, as well as she could, of that painful and grotesque interview.

"You understand, of course," she explained, "that he was half insane with excitement. Otherwise, no such idea could have entered his head. He might as well have begged me to promise that I wouldn't marry the King of Spain—or Briggs the butler. . . . But Beau—" She was very eager to tell him everything. For some obscure reason something like their old relations seemed, at least on the girl's side, to have recurred between them. "Beau, Mr. Blake did begin, this morning, to—say that he—liked me. That was before I had told him of my engagement." She kept her eyes turned away, and she did not know that her cheeks were flushed a little, but the man standing near, watchful and grave, saw it all.

"You see," she said, "when I met him in New York I liked him. He seemed very—nice. But he never came near me when it could be helped. I thought he disliked me. And when I met him yesterday at Cedar Hill he was almost rude. So then

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I was sure of it. It made me angry, because I wanted to be grateful to him and—and hospitable, and all that, on account of his saving my life. He made me angry, and that was why I said to you what I did about him when I came on here yesterday morning. It seems I—misunderstood him. He— Well, it doesn't matter anyhow, because, since father feels so bitter, I couldn't possibly see Mr. Blake. I dare say he'll go back to town at once. He'll realize that his staying on in the neighborhood would make it awkward for everybody.

"So now," she said, with a little laugh, "now you know all about everything." And Temple nodded slowly, saying:

"Yes, now I know all about it." He regarded her for another brief moment, and began to walk up and down the length of the porch, his hands stuck in the pockets of his coat and his head bent. Once he halted and made as if he would speak, then shook his head, and once more took up his silent tramp. But after a little time Vittoria rose to her feet with a sigh. She said:

"I think, if you don't mind, Beau, I'll just go home. I want to think—about my mother. Maggie Callahan has given me so much to think about. I want to be quite alone. You understand, don't you, Beau? You always understand."

"Always, I hope," said he. "I hope so, my dear." He blew his dog-whistle, and a groom came presently round from the side of the house, leading the two

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horses. He put Vittoria up, sent his own nag back to the stable, and stood watching while the girl rode away.

She reined in a few paces off, to call back:

“Where is M. de Coucy? I forgot to ask about him.” Temple told her that the Frenchman was riding—a feat he managed and enjoyed with the aid of a leading-rein held by his servant, who rode close beside him. So then Vittoria went on down the hill, and the man stood on the steps of his porch and watched her out of sight.

XVI

TWO LETTERS

VITTORIA wrote a letter to Richard Blake, She wrote it after much thoughtful hesitation, and she made many false starts, and even tore up two completed efforts. This is what she finally sent to him:

“MY DEAR MR. BLAKE:

“I am writing to you out of what seems to me something like a sense of obligation—obligation to you and to my dear mother and to your father. If there were any probability of our meeting soon again, I could tell you what I wish to say much more easily and much better than I can write it, but you will understand, after the dreadful scene in the garden yesterday, how impossible it will be for me to see you, in view of my father’s bitterness and hard feeling.

“And I need not, I am sure, even make any apology for his words, though they were insulting and unbearable. You know the cause of them, and you know how he feels about what happened so long ago. If nothing more had developed than what we learned together from my father’s words, I should have nothing to say; but I know a great deal more now, and I must tell you some of it for the sake of your own peace of mind, and for the sake of those two who loved each other so much that they broke the law. You

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see, I am aware that your father is far away, so that you cannot reach him, and I can't bear to have you go on for a long time in ignorance of the real truth.

"So here is what I have learned from certain people who know—"

She went on to tell Blake what she had heard from Beau Temple and from Mrs. Callahan, Bianca's nurse, but she put it much more briefly than it had come to her, and she tried to spare her father as far as she was able. She was anxious merely to clear her mother's memory of dishonor, and to clear Creighton Blake's name also.

She concluded:

"You see how it was with them. My poor mother's life had become unendurable, impossible. She would have borne it even then, I am sure, or perhaps have killed herself, but he took her little child from her, and that was too much. I want you to know that, for my part, I understand and forgive and am glad. To be sure, she died, my beautiful mother, even though what she longed for came to her, but I like to think that she died happy. Indeed, I am sure that she did, for she had love at last and understanding and tenderness—her sunlight. She had one perfect year. It must have been a perfect year, must it not? It would hurt me very cruelly to think that she suffered, or regretted what she had done, or that any littlest thing came between the two of them to dim that sunlight.

"I want you to know that I feel no bitterness toward your father, rather a deep and earnest gratitude for what he did—it is as if he had saved my mother from death. Indeed, did he not save her from worse than that? This

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sounds a little dreadful for me to say, I expect, but it is true, and I mean it. It sounds, and is, of course, disloyal to my own father, but I cannot help it.

"And that is all I have to tell you. Most people would maintain that it is very wrong to tell you anything at all, but I believe it is right. You ought to know. I suppose we shall not see each other for a long time, perhaps not until after my marriage—for which there is as yet no date arranged—since I shall be here in the country until that occurs. Afterward we are more or less likely to meet in New York. And so, since this is a long good-bye, let me try once more to say 'thank you' (such poor and absurdly inadequate words!) for what you did for me once when I was in grave danger. Do you know, it is very sweet to me to think that Creighton Blake's son saved my life. My mother would be glad of it, wouldn't she?

"Good-bye! I will say—I can say no more of what passed between us on our last meeting—I mean before my father came—than to beg you to go back to your own good life, which I know you have loved well, and forget that you ever, for a moment, wished to give it up. I do not ask you or want you to forget me, quite, for there is a certain intimate bond which must always be between Creighton Blake's son and Bianca Fleming's daughter. Remember me, but in another way, and I shall remember you, and wish you everything that is good.

Sincerely yours,

"VITTORIA FLEMING."

She was a woman, and therefore added a postscript:

"Perhaps when you write to your father, or when you next talk with him, you will tell him how I **feel** about it all. I think I should like him to know."

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Vittoria sent this letter to Cedar Hill, for though she thought it probable that Blake had returned to town, she knew no other address. And, indeed, he had gone away, despite the Farings' protest, as she afterward learned by telephone from Béatrix. But within two days she had an answer from him, and when it was put into her hands from the afternoon post took it down into her rose garden to read. It was a long letter, but she read it over two or three times, then put it into the bosom of her frock for safe-keeping, and read it once again when she dressed for dinner. She fell into a way of carrying the folded, close-written sheets about with her—always in her bosom for safe-keeping—and when she was out on her solitary walks or was sitting alone in her garden enclosure she read them over until she knew the letter almost by heart. Then one day she, as it were, caught herself at it, perceived that the paper bore signs of age and wear, realized that it had gone next her heart for a week, and locked it away in a sort of paroxysm of shamed self-scorn.

Blake looked upon the matter exactly as she did, and as she had felt sure he would do, but he seemed to have had small need of portraits or other extraneous aids in coming to his conclusion; he seemed to have reached it at once, in a single leap, taking his bearings from what he knew of his father, what he observed in Pender Fleming, and what he guessed of Pender's wife. But he expressed himself as being very much touched and affected by what Vittoria

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told him in her letter, and immensely grateful to her for the telling. So he came to the other matter upon which she had dwelt in conclusion. He thanked her for her expressions, but he said that what she asked of him was impossible. He seemed to have used great care in his language, so that he should not appear to be making love to another man's fiancée, but he said, as he had said during that interview in the walled garden, that he could not give up hope of her, for the hope was his life. He was not an eloquent man, either in spoken or written speech, but there was something in the ring of the short, terse sentences that he spoke or wrote which was much better, infinitely more appealing, than any flowery expressions could have been, and there was more eloquence in the things he left unsaid in this letter than in the things he tried to express. They stood out in blazing characters from between the written lines—the fierce and tender and compelling love words that Blake would not write—and Vittoria read them there, and her heart beat faster because of them, and she turned a little pale. And once or twice when she had been reading the letter she closed her eyes and called up the image of Richard Blake before her—only that is saying a little too much, for she made no actual effort; she waited an instant in a sort of blind silence of the spirit, and he came. But when she had done that she was ashamed, and reproached herself, and put the whole matter away in the back of her mind—at the bottom of the well.

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So Blake went away, since that seemed the only possible thing to do, but he did not go very far away, and he had no intention whatever of returning, as Vittoria begged him to do, to the old life which he had loved so well. That love was gone forever. He sat, as it were, apart, on the horizon line, and watched and bode his time.

But there was no doubt that his retirement from the field removed an intolerable strain, and left those at Standish or in its neighborhood to settle down into a pleasant state of leisurely calm. Vittoria went often to Cedar Hill, and Béatrix Faring came almost as often to Standish. The two fell into a habit of riding together nearly every morning while the elder woman's lord and master toiled laboriously and resentfully over his monograph. Beau Temple rode with them sometimes, and between him and Béatrix Faring there began to spring up a friendship which afterward grew and ripened and far outlasted the brief span of events with which this chronicle has to do, and bids fair to endure as long as they both shall live—a good friendship, born of natural sympathy and understanding and mutual admiration.

Early in the course of this period Vittoria had a dinner-party at Standish, to which the Farings and Beau Temple and M. de Coucy were bidden. Pender Fleming came to the head of his table fairly clanking, as it were, in an armor of grim determination to do his utmost, and, without doubt, he did it. Never was a braver attempt on the part of the dead

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to live again, but at that it was a dire performance—hopeless from the beginning, and, afterward, when the two women had gone to the drawing-room for their coffee, they laughed over it quite frankly and without malice.

“My dear child,” Béatrix said, “it’s no good, really. The poor man suffers quite too much. I could hardly eat for pity of him. We mustn’t make him do it any more. You must talk to him tomorrow and tell him that we all understand how he has got out of the way of company, and that nobody’s feelings will be hurt if he doesn’t turn up at any little parties we may have at Cedar Hill or that Mr. Temple may have at his place. Fancy! he’s probably staying awake at night to agonize over the prospect of interminable entertainments. You must put him out of pain at once.” So on the next morning Vittoria followed this suggestion, and while her father only said a gruff “Yes, yes, quite so!” or something like that, she saw the immense relief that spread over his face, and knew what a load had gone from his mind.

So for a little time the three households, excluding the master of Standish, went freely back and forth, rode, played tennis and golf, motored in the Farings’ cars, met for dinner, and altogether amused themselves very successfully. It was, for Vittoria, a time of obscure development, of hidden growth. She was inexplicably aware of it. Very deep within her something was moving, like an underground river,

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very slow but irresistible. She did not know what it was nor whither it tended, but she knew that it was there, hidden, silent, flowing mysteriously on toward regions unguessed, and she wondered about it, but incuriously because she was rather apathetic just then.

She was in a state of passive content, or something very like content. She had her beautiful mother to comfort her night and day—that strange and thrilling story to reflect upon and to dream over; she had the companionship of Béatrix Faring, of whom she was truly fond, and she had Beau Temple—cheerfulest, most tactful, least exigent of all lovers. Even in her mental attitude toward her father—very bitter after the first hearing of that pathetic history of long ago—she had come to a quieter, more tolerant state. She had not forgiven him and she never would, but she understood the man's nature much more readily than most young girls could have done, and she realized that, as Beau Temple had said, he had a great deal in himself to contend with. Still, the gulf which was always between daughter and father had been widened a little by her new knowledge. She pitied him and made certain excuses for him, but she could not forget that he had taken her mother's little child from her.

She saw Beau Temple very often. He had established a habit of coming to Standish every afternoon, however the mornings might have been spent, and the two had an hour alone in Vittoria's garden. The man was wise and watchful—held himself with

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a hard hand. Vittoria did not know it at the time, but afterward she knew, and appreciated, and realized how much it must have cost him. He managed that their old relation should seem but little changed, and he managed so well that she was quite unconscious of the fact. They spoke often of their life to come, made plans and discussed them—settled it that there was to be much travel in summer and autumn, the late winter in New York for gayety's sake—a month of the season in London later on, and odd times at Lone Tree Hill.

"After we've been very gay and dissolute for a year or two," Vittoria said, "then we shall probably want to settle down quietly once more—here in the country. For, of course, the books must go on. Consider the feelings of the 'chosen few'! But at first, Beau dear, I do want to play. I've had so little play, you know—just enough to want a lot more." And Temple said, emphatically:

"You shall have it! You shall have all you want of it. I'm no Barbe-Bleu. You shall play to your heart's content, and I'll come gambolling along behind as giddily as my rheumatic old legs can manage.

"I wonder," he said, with a questioning frown—"I wonder, now, if I sha'n't seem a rather absurd and heavy-footed elderly goat? I wonder if I sha'n't seem to drag upon you?" The question seemed to be presented to Vittoria's mind rather than to his own. He regarded her keenly.

But the girl was a little angry, and said:

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"Don't be an idiot, Beau! You seem to be making yourself out about sixty. If you want to adopt a vieillard pose you'll have to make some important changes in personal appearance. 'Elderly goat,' indeed!"

He flushed a little with pleasure at her scorn, but still shook his head.

"Well, I might get fat," he pointed out, and this time roused her. She cried:

"You shall do nothing of the kind! That's one thing I won't endure. I'll not have you fat. You'll have to get up early in the morning and run eight miles before breakfast with a sweater on. You'll have to take the anti-things that one reads about in the papers. I won't have you fat. We'll agree upon a weight—a maximum, and whenever you reach that you'll have to live on biscuits and hot water for a fortnight. Oh, it's very easy if you're firm about it."

"I perceive," said Beau Temple, "that there is to be some firmness in the family whether it belongs to me or not. You map out one of the most peaceful old ages I have ever heard of, but, if you don't mind, I think I should like a plain, unostentatious poison when that maximum weight comes true. It's both simpler and more certain."

Afterward when Vittoria looked back upon this fortnight of daily meetings she was astonished to find how almost completely they were steeped in this spirit of mild and rather foolish banter. She won-

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dered if that had all been Temple's doing, or if he had just started it so and let it take its course, or if he had been merely passive in the matter. In any case she knew, then, that he had pressed her with no lover's ardor, made no demands upon her, begged for no vows of affection. She was touched and grateful when she remembered that, and she would have been both touched and grateful at the time if she had realized it.

Afterward she remembered also an odd little scene which was a sort of keynote to all this—very significant if she had but known. It chanced that their first two or three meetings, after the engagement was made definite, were within sight or hearing of somebody. The first time, as has been told, a gardener was near, the second time a groom. So it was that the first occasion upon which they met quite alone was in Vittoria's garden a day or two after Richard Blake's return to New York. Vittoria was sitting there with a magazine when Temple arrived, and she had expected him and was not taken by surprise. She rose to her feet with a little exclamation of welcome, and put out her hands. The man took them, moved near and bent over her. She had been used to kissing him in a child-like fashion all her life, and she raised her beautiful face as calmly as she had done ten years before—not a gleam in her of the consciousness of a difference. So they stood for a brief instant, and it is not improbable that pulses quickened and throbbed and beat in the man. But

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he made a sound like a little sigh, bent his head aside, kissed her cheek as a hundred times before, and stood away from her.

Vittoria remembered that, and it brought tears to her eyes.

XVII

MR. TEMPLE IS TRIED IN THE FIRE—

"IT has only just gone twelve," said Béatrix Faring, looking at the watch on her wrist. "Let Jimmy take your horse round with mine, and help me use up some of the hour and a half before luncheon—unless you'll stay and lunch with us, which would be better still." The two had been riding together. Temple took her down, and the stable-boy led away the horses.

"I can't lunch with you to-day," he said, "because De Coucy will be expecting me, but I'll stay for a half hour with pleasure. Shall we go into the house or stop here on the porch?"

"We'll go to my little summer-house thing," Mrs. Faring decided. "It's shady at this time of the day, and the view is too lovely for words. I've had a comfortable seat put in it, and an awning stretched overhead so that beasts can't drop into my hair, and I often sit there with a book or with my letters." She fastened her riding-skirt, and they set off across the turf toward the tiny summer-house which stood on the brink of the hill.

The little structure had but three sides, and they

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were mere latticed trellises where Virginia-creeper clung thick and strong. There was a mouldy roof, from whose varied fauna one was protected by the subjoined awning, and a mouldy floor which was covered by a rug. The comfortable seat of which Mrs. Faring had spoken stood invitingly empty, and beside it a table was littered with magazines and with writing things, and with boxes of cigarettes. Béatrix had not spoken over-strongly of the view. It was, indeed, too lovely for words—a wide sweep of rolling country which extended fanwise from Mickleford at the south to the high green northern hills: very many miles of wood and meadow and fat, tilled land, with here and there the odd solitary up-cropping rises such as Standish and Lone Tree and Cedar Hill lay upon—a very peaceful picture of green and brown domed over by blue, unclouded sky, smudged here and there by village smoke, picked out, as to high lights, by the white of village steeples.

Béatrix Faring made herself comfortable at one end of the double seat, and, after a space of silent gazing, the man joined her.

“You have cigarettes, of course?” she said. “You’d better smoke them than accept mine, because mine are some silly little Russian ones that a misguided friend sent me. But for a naturally thrifty disposition I should have thrown them away long ago. Instead I resentfully consume them, hoping against hope that the three hundred I have

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left will turn mouldy or something. Of course they won't."

She lighted one of the maligned cylinders, and leaned back in her place, watching the man who sat beside her silent, his hands clasped over his knees, his face turned out over the sunlit valley. And after a somewhat long pause she said, still watching him:

"Do you know, being engaged doesn't seem to agree with you, altogether. You don't look—well. You look rather tired and fagged." Temple turned to her with a laugh.

"Oh, that's in the part!" said he. "That's all in the stage directions. Lover's pallor—frenzied eye—careless dress—general neglect—all that sort of thing!" But she shook her head at him.

"Those are the stage directions—or used to be—for the hopeless lover, not the successful one. You ought to be going about in gay waistcoats and a silly, perpetual smile. No, it hasn't agreed with you. I wonder—

"I believe," she mocked, "that you're a little afraid. I believe you've been looking ahead at the mangled fragments that your nice, quiet, peaceful life is going to be torn into. It *will* be a change, won't it?"

"Yes," said Beaumont Temple, smiling. "Yes, it certainly will be a change."

"The 'chosen few,' now," she said, still in her gently mocking tone. "What will they think of it?"

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Their sacred apostle marrying a giddy young girl and sitting up late of nights at dancing-parties. Dear me! What will the 'chosen few' think about it?"

"Damn the 'chosen few!' " said Temple, violently, but she shook her head at him.

"Oh no! You can't dismiss them with a damn. You made them. They're yours. They hold up their little bills to you to be fed, and you're the responsible feeding 'party.' You can't shirk your responsibilities like that, you know. Gracious me! Suppose marriage should suddenly turn you into a romanticist! Just suppose that! It might, you know. Beaumont Temple writing about rose gardens and first kisses and hard-hearted parents! Oh me, oh my! The very thought gives me a chill."

Seemingly it did not chill the apostle of the "chosen few," for he laughed, and after a moment laughed again. But abruptly Béatrix Faring dropped her tone of banter, and she regarded the man for a little space in grave silence. At its end—

"We've become what one might call very good friends," she said. "Haven't we?"

"I think one might call it that without exaggeration," said he. "I hope we have become very good friends indeed. It—is a friendship I shouldn't like to think of doing without, now that I know its value."

"We've both," said the woman, "seen a good deal, and suffered somewhat, and grown, I hope, wiser

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than we were. I'm inclined to take advantage of our friendship to speak plainly. May I?" And when he said, "Please do," she went on, choosing her words with a slow care:

"I know that dear girl rather well, and I think I know you more than a little. You'll be very good to her, very forbearing, full of self-sacrifice, full of tenderness. She'll be in wise and gentle hands, and yet—I wonder if it's wise for you two to marry? I think I'm afraid about it." She saw that the man's face was grave and a little pale. She saw his lips move dumbly, and thought they tried to say "Why? Why?"

"The child is so young," she said—"so very young, and so eager. She has such a passionate hunger for—what shall I say?—for the love that only a young man has it in him to give: the young love—the young, fierce, tumultuous love that has no humor in it. Afterward the fires burn lower—leaping flame sinks to the steady, enduring glow. We both know that, you and I. And we know that the quiet, steady fire burns longest—warms us for a lifetime—that flames leap and devour for only a little while. But we wouldn't have gone without the leaping flames, not for anything in this world! We cherish the wonderful memory of them. They're romance. That's what they are—romance. And they burn only when one is very young, and has, for the time being, no humor."

She looked up at Beaumont Temple challengingly.

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"You've had your romance—or tales I have heard were lies."

"Yes," said he, chafing his broad hands together, and looking down upon them.

"Yes," he said, in a low voice. "I've had my romance—and buried it—long ago. And yet—" A little flush came over his face.

"It is," said he, "an odd fact that, even at four-and-forty, the flames can leap up in one—amazing flames. I hadn't thought it possible, but I know it to be true. I—don't go to her with quite an old man's love, you know. It's hardly May and December between Vittoria and me."

"No," said Béatrix Faring. "Shall we say, May and October? Even then—"

"I love her!" cried the man, with a sudden sharpness. "I think I have loved her for years—and hoped—and waited. Would you have me give her up now at the last—now, when she has come to me of her own accord? She trusts me—turns to me. She has always turned to me, brought me her troubles, perplexities, all her life. And she says that she loves me. It may not be that she—that she feels for me any great and overwhelming passion. She doesn't, I confess. But about the need for that—I'm not so sure. The flames you talk of may sear and destroy, you know. As often as not they ravage instead of warming. I'm not so sure."

"Don't cheat Vittoria out of her romance!" the woman said. And she said:

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"I know that you love her. I can't pretend to attack that. And I know she loves you. But is it in the right way? Don't you see? I'm fighting with you for Vittoria's youth—for her right to that mad and foolish and divine and absurd young love that you'd cheat her of. If you marry her, one of two things will happen—either the two of you will go through a sort of absurd parody of the kind of life Vittoria loves and longs for (and you'd play an unbecoming part there, my friend. You would, truly), or else you will settle down quietly here in the country to the sort of life you yourself have, for the past fifteen or twenty years, lived and enjoyed. In other words, one of you must inevitably be sacrificed to the other, for your tastes and desires are as far apart as pole from pole. Can real happiness come of such a marriage as that?"

Beaumont Temple took his head into his hands.

"You speak very plain words," said he. "You paint in cardinal colors. But I thank you for it. The wounds of a friend. . . . Of course any sacrifice made would be made by me. That is understood between us. And I think I could conceal the sacrifice. Perhaps not. I don't know. Doubtless she would in time find out. Vittoria is not dull." He dropped his hands and faced the woman with a little wry smile. The scene was costing him something. His face looked thinner.

"I seem to see the black cap on your head," said he. "I seem to be listening to something like a death

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sentence—though I am not yet sure that I concur in it, and that, alas, is necessary. One reads one's own sentence in these vital matters. One is both judge and hangman. I'm not yet sworn into office. It wants thought." His eyes sharpened.

"You talk much of romance and young love. You're speaking with a purpose—something beyond. What is it you have in your mind?"

"I have Richard Blake in my mind," she said. "I think the child loves him, and I know very well that he loves her."

Temple gave an exclamation, and for some little time thereafter was silent, with bent head—his hands restless upon his knees.

Mrs. Faring made out that he said, finally:

"The black cap, indeed!"

He looked up at her.

"I feared it," said he. "I was afraid of that, but I wouldn't face my fear. I was cowardly. When the thought came I hustled it away and tried to pretend that it wasn't there. Creighton Blake's son!"

"He saved her life, you know."

"Yes. A life for a life. The score would seem to be even, poetically speaking. But Pender will never see it in that light. Pender's inflexible—as hard as granite. . . . Creighton Blake's son! Ah, I have somewhat of Pender's feeling there. Rather any one else in the world! Any one! There's something terrible in the thought."

"There is nothing terrible in it to me," said

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Béatrix Faring. "I see beauty in it—the white magic—something bigger and simpler and more fatal than we often see in this age of ours: the consummation of tremendous things begun long ago. It seems to me that it must have been meant to happen. I cannot believe that Vittoria Fleming and Richard Blake fell in with each other by accident—that he saved her life by wanton chance. I think those two, whether they know it or not, are playing out their part in a great drama. Don't stand in the way! Don't interfere!" Her eyes widened a little upon Beau Temple's eyes—showed something like dread.

"Don't get in the way!" she said again. "I have a very strong feeling that even if you should—you couldn't stop the play those two are playing. You might make it worse—pitiable—tragic, like that older case—the—shall I say it?—the first act. But I have a feeling that you couldn't stop it, you know."

She added, quaintly:

"Are the Fates still alive, do you think, and working, in these matter-of-fact Christian days of ours?"

"I am forced to believe they are," said the man. "Fate—since we must give a name to forces we see so dimly, know so little of—'Fate' is as good a name as another." He looked upon her heavily, with sad eyes, and she saw that she had stirred him to the bottom. Yet there was strength left in him to cry out. He demanded:

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"How shall one know that she loves this man?"
And Béatrix said:

"I have a woman's eyes. I have seen."

"Yet she turned from him to me."

"Oh, my friend!" said the woman, "is not that proof enough? Consider the circumstances of that turning. She loves him. She may not know it fully. She doesn't confess it even to her secret soul, I'll be bound. But she loves him, and she'll go to him in the end, even though laws be broken and hearts with them. Don't help to set laws in the way!"

"There's Pender!" said the man. "Even were I to clear the path for her, there remains Pender, looming above. You know the rash promise Vittoria made to him. She'll keep that. She never breaks her word. She'll break her heart, first."

"Yet, in the end she'll go," said Béatrix Faring. "Hearts break, and then the strength goes—the strength to resist. Little by little it goes—trickling away—and then comes a sort of blind madness—a fury of despair. And then the end. I speak of what I know. Mr. Fleming must be made to give Vittoria back her promise."

Beau Temple broke into a brief, mirthless sound of laughter.

"Who can make Pender do that?"

"You, perhaps," said she.

The man stared at her whitely. And after a pause he said:

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"You drive hard."

"I am fighting for Vittoria Fleming's happiness," said she. "And perhaps I'm fighting for yours too. I fight as I can. But I think I have said no more than the truth. Can you deny anything I have said—in spirit?—the words are nothing."

"I neither affirm nor deny," he said. "I wait—and reflect." And after a pause he spoke again.

"I want her to be happy. I want happiness for her. That's all. What if, in giving her her freedom now, I abandon her to misery? Who can be sure?"

"No one," said Mrs. Faring. "No one can be sure of the future, I think. One can only do what seems to be right."

Temple had risen to his feet, and, as he said the last words, he stood facing the woman, his back to the wide view of rolling hills. By chance his eyes met a space of the latticework where the vines had died away. He said:

"A young man is coming down from the house in this direction. Who can it be?" Béatrix Faring turned to look, and turned back with flushed cheeks.

"It is Richard Blake," she said. "I was going to tell you that he is here. He came for a day or two only, in response to a call from Harry, who wanted to consult him about this monograph matter. He will go back to town to-morrow, and Vittoria need not know that he has been here. Shall I go

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and take him away somewhere while you get your horse?"

Beaumont Temple drew a little sigh.

"Let him come!" said he. "And, if you do not mind, leave us alone together."

XVIII

AND PROVES GOOD METAL—OLD FRIENDS QUARREL

TO Miss Vittoria Fleming, emerging from the house after lunch with half a dozen magazines under one arm and a box of chocolates under the other (Mr. Hennessy, with a chop-bone, at her feet), appeared Beaumont Temple, riding up the hill. He drew rein when he was near, and sat regarding her with at least a semblance of mirth—it may well be that far other emotions warred within him. He said:

“This has all the look of a projected debauch. I come *malapropos*.”

“On the contrary,” said she, “you come just in the nick of time, delightful person. Send your horse round—ah, here is Jeremiah to take him!—and come down into the garden with me! You shall have half the chocolates—all but the cocoanut ones; only sheer physical brutality shall wrest those from me.”

Temple dismounted, seeming to move with less than his usual lightness—a little stiffly, as became his middle age. He said:

“This is not revelry you offer. You ask me to connive at manslaughter. Half that box of horrors devoured, I should never again rise from my bed.”

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They went down through the gardens (Mr. Hennessy, with his chop-bone, at their heels), past the pool of the goldfish, and so at last into Vittoria's brick-walled sanctuary. There the girl laid down her burdens upon a bench, and turned about. She held Beau Temple by the arms with her two hands and lifted her face to him, while the scandalized Mr. Hennessy averted his gaze.

The man became suddenly grave, with an odd and joyless gravity, standing still in her grasp. He asked:

"Do you love me, my dear?" And she gave a little sweet rippling laugh, and nodded her head like a child.

For an instant his face was bitter, then a sudden dark flush swept it. He put out his arms and caught her up in them, crushed her against him with an almost brutal violence. The girl's face was close to his, nearly touching it. She saw his eyes blaze with something she had never before seen in them, felt his swift and uneven breathing. Terror woke in her—a very frenzy of terror and repulsion. She cried out and began to struggle, pushing against his face with her two hands, writhing in his hold. She said:

"No! no! no! let me go! You frighten me. I'm frightened! Please, Beau!" Mr. Hennessy began to bark loudly.

Temple loosed his hold and set the girl gently away from him, using care, lest, in her panic of haste, she stumble and fall. The flush was gone from his

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face, and he covered it with his hands, standing bowed.

But after a long moment so, he felt her hands once more upon his arm, and looked up. The girl held him, leaned toward him, her lips quivering, tears in her eyes. She said:

"Ah, Beau, I'm sorry! Forgive me, dear Beau. I—you frightened me a little. That was all. Startled me. I didn't expect—please forgive me! I know. I'm not a fool. Only, we've never before been very—loverlike, have we? Not in—that way, I mean. That's why I was startled. Will you forgive me for struggling against you, Beau?"

He took her hands, smiling. But she saw that his face was pale and oddly drawn.

"It is for me to ask your forgiveness, child. I wanted—there was something I wanted to know—had to find out. I went about it brutally. Forgive me, but I had to know."

He slipped his arm about her shoulders, holding her very loosely before him.

"The truth is," said he—"the truth is, my dear, we've been making a mistake. I've been afraid of it for a long time—at last, quite sure. This—a moment ago—this was nothing, a sort of little test, to make certainty more certain. We both know, I think."

She could not answer him for a little while—stood with her head bowed against his shoulder, her face hidden.

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What the man said was so true! She knew at last. That single close instant had made the truth plain to her. The utter panic-stricken terror of dreadful unknown things was cold at her heart still. The passion which should have leaped to meet his passion was not in her—not for him. In its stead that virginal pride, the warder of the sanctuary, shrank back, cried aloud, as against threatened outrage. She knew now, at last, that she could never marry him.

She cried his name in a kind of sob, her face hidden against the man's shoulder. And he said, soothing her—the true and tried Beau Temple of so many years—he said:

“I know. I know, child. And I want you to understand that there is no blame in all this, save upon me. The blame is mine altogether. I was old enough, and should have been wise enough, to know that the thing was impossible from the beginning. Well, thank Heaven! we've found it out in time.”

“Oh Beau!” she cried, “is it impossible? Must we give it up?” She knew. She was still sick at heart with the knowledge, but she was full of sorrow for him in his bitter hour. Her knees were trembling a little, and she turned away and sat down upon the wooden bench, covering her face. Her movement dislodged the heap of magazines, and they slid to the ground and lay about her feet, but the little box of chocolate sweets, pink-glazed, gilt-lettered, stood in its place, and seemed to grin a smug grin—intolerably preposterous in the face of that sober scene.

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Temple began to speak—soften—explain—tell how he had watched her from the beginning of their engagement, suspected that all was not quite well, suspected why, put two and two together. And he even told a little of his talk that morning with Béatrix Faring. He made feeble attempts to cheer her up, to add something like humor where there was precious little of such to be found. He seemed to himself to be talking dreary and endless nonsense, and very likely it was so, but it is doubtful if Vittoria heard any of it at all. She sat for a long time, her face bowed over her hands, and made no movement of any kind. But at last she looked up very sadly, and interrupted that lamentable flow. She said:

“Beau dear, it is very like you to speak of me only in all this—to say nothing of yourself. But how about you, Beau?”

“Ah!” she cried, “have I brought you nothing after all these years but grief and bitterness? After all you’ve done for me, always, shall I give you back nothing but a broken heart?”

“No!” he exclaimed, strongly. “No, child! I won’t have you think that. You give me now, and always will give me, I think, the most I ought ever to have expected or wished. I had a period of madness and dreamed a sort of mad dream. Let’s try to forget it. It could never have been anything but a dream. Let’s go back to the old, sweet, comfortable footing once more, and, please God! stay there for the rest of our lives. It’s where we belong.”

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"Can you do that, Beau?" she demanded, watching his face. "Can you go back?" And he said:

"I promise you. Try me, and see!" He pulled out his watch and consulted it.

"I must be off. I want to talk to Pender. Perhaps I shall see you again afterward." He turned away, but Vittoria rose and went to him, held him with her arms, and laid her beautiful face upon his shoulder. She seemed to find no words to say. She was extraordinarily tongue-tied—a strange paralysis upon her—shaken still, within and without, by that illuminating moment—aghast at her new knowledge. She seemed to herself to have been moving in some strange, very feverish dream wherein the one dear being whom she had always loved and leaned upon became suddenly transformed into a terrible stranger with fierce, flaming eyes and brutal arms. She was sick to her very soul. The man patted her head awkwardly, and after a moment turned away again. At a little distance he said, over his shoulder:

"Oh, I saw Richard Blake. He's back at Cedar Hill for a day or two, on some business of Faring's. I—talked to him. So he knows."

Vittoria cried out sharply, and called after the man, but he shook his head and went on up the garden path toward the house.

He found Pender Fleming where that recluse was always to be found—in his big, dim, book-lined room, sitting quite idle over a heavy folio which was spread

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out upon his knees. Pender looked up with that strange contortion of the face which he meant for a smile. He said:

"Ah, Beau! Come in! Come in! I'm glad to see you. My eyes are tired to-day. I can't do much. I'm glad you came."

"You won't be, presently," said Beaumont Temple, standing square and sturdy before the other's chair.

"I've come armed," he said. "We've got to do battle here to-day, you and I." And Pender Fleming peered up with his short-sighted eyes, vaguely alarmed, dimly apprehensive.

Temple had rehearsed several diplomatic openings for what he wished to say, but had thrown them aside one after the other. Diplomacy was of little use with Pender. Combat with him must be hand-to-hand—no quarter asked or given. Temple took a breath and struck.

"I've just come from Vittoria," he said. "I've been giving her back her freedom. I dare say you have a right to know it—and to know why."

"Yes," said Pender Fleming, "I think I have that right." He would seem to have had himself extraordinarily well in hand, for he made no show of the astonishment he must have felt—dropped at once, expertly as it were, into a hard, quiet tone which the other man knew only too well, and frowned at. Pender was at his worst when he spoke in that tone—his coldest, bitterest. He was well-nigh unapproachable.

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"To what," said he, "does my daughter owe the honor of being jilted by you?—if I may presume so far as to ask."

The other man scowled, but kept his temper. He said:

"Well, for one thing—we may as well say the only thing, I suppose, for it's quite enough—she doesn't love me—not in the right way, at least."

Vittoria's father waved his hand.

"Is that," he said, "so important, then—the especial kind and degree of a girl's love?"

"Yes, Pender, it is," said Beaumont Temple. "Strange as it may seem to you, it is. It's so important that we cannot go on without it. Look here!" He came a step nearer, so that he stood almost over his host, a square and earnest figure, frowning, his hands stuck into the pockets of his coat. The two made a curious contrast, the strong and virile man of middle age, brown from the sun and wind, broad-shouldered and sturdy, and that gross, shapeless figure in the arm-chair—the vast and still and pallid face in which only the eyes seemed to live and move, gleaming dully from under their gray brows.

"Look here!" said Beaumont Temple. "We've known each other for a long time, Pender. We can speak frankly to each other—tell the truth. Don't put on airs with me! I'm not impressed by them. Don't take refuge in sarcasm! I laugh at it. Face me honestly and deal with me as I deal with you!"

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I confess that I've made a bad mistake. I was a fool. I thought that child, who had been a sort of little sister to me for twenty years, could be made over into a lover and a wife by the miracle of a few words. I was a fool. Such things don't happen—not once in ten thousand times. I told her how I'd come to feel—this spasm of second youth I found myself in—begged her to try to think of me in a new way, and she tried. As a matter of fact, I found her, just then, at a certain psychological crisis, though I didn't know till long after—one of those womanish states of mind we men will never comprehend—and that helped me on, threw her, as one might say, into my arms.

"Of course, it turned out to be quite preposterous. She hadn't altered her attitude toward me by a hair's-breadth. It would have been the most damnable of crimes to have let her go on with it. Besides—well, I found out where we stood, and stopped it to-day. No. Vittoria did not ask to be released. I did it myself. She's glad it's over. I know that. And so, in a fashion, am I. It would have come to shipwreck sooner or later. Better find out where the harm is before the voyage begins."

Pender Fleming's eyes gleamed alertly in his white and mask-like face. The rest of his great body might have been dead.

"You have not yet come to the point!" said he. "There's something behind all this. What is it?" The younger man drew a sigh.

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"Have it, then!" he said.

"Pender, we poor mortals can't fight against Fate. If we do, we get most hideously smashed. I do not wish to cause you unnecessary pain, but I must ask you to look back eighteen years for evidence of that. If Vittoria and I should marry it is all too possible that that old tragedy would be re-enacted, and I won't expose the child to such a danger. She loves Richard Blake, Pender, and Richard Blake loves her."

That roused the man at last. He gave a sort of wailing cry, and his hands shook and rattled upon the wooden chair arms. His still face began to twist and writhe as Vittoria had once seen it do. But abruptly the strange, silent spasm broke into terrible laughter, low and very mirthless.

"You—you mean to give her up to—give her up to—him?" he asked. It seemed to be impossible to say Richard Blake's name. And the younger man said:

"Yes, Pender. She loves him, and I believe him to be worthy. I talked with him to—once. I liked him. He is a brave and unselfish young man. In talking with him, I discovered, quite by chance, that he is the man some friends of mine—and his—told me about last year. I dare say they told me that his name was Blake, but it would have meant nothing to me at that time. There are hundreds of Blakes. I won't go into the story, but I will say that I would give all I have ever achieved or ever shall achieve

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if men could honestly tell about me what these men told me about young Richard Blake. He's true gold, Pender. The child can make no mistake in marrying him. I withdraw from the field. They love each other, and who am I to stand in love's way?"

"You don't happen to know," said Vittoria's father—"you don't happen to know of a trifling promise she made me?"

"Oh yes," said Beau Temple, "I know of it. You must give her back her promise, Pender. I have stepped out of her way to give her her chance for happiness. You must complete the gift. It's all we two oldsters live for, I take it, eh?—to see that child happy. Her happiness is ours. Well, now's the time, my friend. Give her back her promise and your blessing with it."

He paused there, as if for a reply, but the other man was still. Not even a muscle of those pendulous jowls or that out-thrust lower lip twitched; only the eyes seemed to be alive. They looked out from the shadows watchful and alert, and—gleaming so, out of that vast immobility—there was something baleful about them, Temple thought, something uncanny and serpentlike.

He frowned, and took a short turn across the room and back.

"Of course, I understand," said he, "that it hurts you to give your daughter to Creighton Blake's son. I understand that. And yet, after all, why? This

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young man certainly cannot be blamed for his father's sins. He will have been, eighteen years ago, a little lad in school. He had nothing to do with the affair. Also, you must remember, that while his father took away, he has restored. He saved your child's life. That evens matters, eh?" Temple came to an impatient stop before his host.

"Come, Pender!" said he. "Don't sit there like a make-believe Oriental image. Man, speak up! Say you'll let the child off her promise! You'll have to do it in the end, you know. Make a virtue of the necessity, and do it handsomely now. You'll be well repaid in love and gratitude—and that's good coin. Speak up!"

"Never, so long as I live, nor after!" said Pender Fleming, in a low voice. "She has given me her solemn promise. Ah, my prophetic soul! I felt it would come to this. I felt it—and she shall keep that promise, not only so long as I live, but so long as she lives after me." He licked his dry lips.

But Beau Temple gave an exclamation of mingled anger and disgust.

"Oh, rubbish!" said he. "Pender, you're behaving like a fool. I'm ashamed of you. You're behaving like a stubborn child who wants to beat everybody in sight because it has been hurt. Come! Be as human as you can. You love the girl, in your fashion, I take it? Well, you've never yet given any very good proof of that. Give it now."

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"Never in this world!" said Pender Fleming.
"Never, under any conceivable circumstances!"

"Be careful, Pender!" cried the younger man.
"Think what you say! Remember what happened long ago. You're in a fair way to make it happen again, you know."

"I have her solemn promise!"

"Aye," said Beau Temple. "Aye, that you have. And if you play Shylock with her, she'll keep it as long as she can. Promises, friend, are of the conscious will. So long as that holds they are held, and hearts may break to keep them. But how about afterward? Hearts break, and then the strength goes—the strength to resist—" He was so very much in earnest that he did not realize how he was quoting word upon word from Béatrix Faring. "Little by little it goes—trickling away—and then comes a sort of blind madness—a fury of despair—and then the end. Who of us knows the end of his strength to resist? Another woman, Pender, as pure and good and sweet a woman as ever breathed God's air, made a promise once—to love, honor, and obey. But there came something so far beyond her imagination, so far beyond her strength to resist, that she was like a wind-blown straw—a little boat in a storm. What could her easy promises do for her then?"

Pender Fleming suddenly hid his face, and strange, little, shivering, moaning voices came from behind the strained fingers.

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"Let me be!" he cried. "Let me be, for God's sake!"

"I think," said Beau Temple, quaintly, "that it is for God's sake I dare not let you be. For God's and Vittoria's. Yes, and for yours as well. . . . Do you love the child?"

The elder man dropped his hands from his contorted face, and Beau Temple averted his eyes. It seemed to him a sort of spiritual nakedness he looked upon—something indecent, obscene.

"Yes, yes!" he said, with a sort of hurried awkwardness.

"To be sure. Of course you love her. Well, prove it! Now's the time."

"What you ask of me is impossible—impossible," said Pender Fleming. He spoke in a choked whisper, breathing hard. But again the younger man cried out upon him in anger.

"This is incredible! It is inhuman. Man, you don't know what you're saying. You rave." Abruptly he bent forward to look close into the other's white face, and so stared upon him while one might have counted ten. In the end he recoiled, tight-lipped. He said:

"This is beyond my uttermost conception of human vileness. A man so poisoned in soul that he will wreck his only child's life to pay a debt of hatred! It is beyond belief."

And after a silent space, he said:

"Vengeance is God's, Pender. Not yours."

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He came forward a step toward the great writing-table and the man who sat, still as death, behind it. And, when he spoke, his voice was very grave.

"We two," said he, "have known each other for a good many years. I have come here to sit with you and to walk and talk with you as no other human soul has done through two decades. You have seemed glad of my friendship. It has been your one remaining link with the outside world. But I warn you, Pender, that unless you give over this hideous and brutal madness of yours—give it over this day and hour—set that innocent child free of her rash promise—I warn you, that unless you do this, I will go from out your house, and, as God is above us, I will never again set foot in it while you live."

As little rippling shadows shiver across still water before a squall of wind, so shadows or something like them fled across Pender Fleming's still face, and, it may be, left it a little grayer—the lines a little deeper and more haggard. But he did not speak. Even then he did not speak.

"Stand up!" cried Beaumont Temple, in a great voice. He began to tremble a little with wrath—the righteous wrath of a good man moved beyond bearing.

"Stand up and speak like a man," said he, "if there is any manliness left in you!" He pointed a rigid and accusing finger.

"I say, if there is any manliness left in you, but I almost believe there is none. You have posed and shammed and pretended here for twenty years—a

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mock monument of deathless grief—the caricature of a sorrowful man! I have watched you, Pender, from first to last, and I have seen you strutting before your mental mirror, preening your black feathers, schooling your face into a mask of melancholy, delighting in the perfection with which you played your miserable rôle. A great blow smote you twenty years ago—a blow to stagger any man; but not to crush him for life, not to make him forget that he had still a life to live, and other lives that hung upon his. Another man, a real man, would have bowed his head to the storm, and, when the bitterest of his grief was over, when time had covered his wounds a little, would have raised it again and looked his responsibilities in the face, set his shoulder again to the good and wholesome tasks God had allotted him. . . . What have you done? You have filled your paltry soul with one contemptible thought—hatred. You have set in the midst of your mental horizon one contemptible object—vengeance.

“How have you behaved to that child, that blameless child who was left in your hands—the most solemn and exacting responsibility that can be laid upon a human soul? What have you done for her? Nothing, I say! Absolutely nothing! Not only have you never stirred your hand in her cause, but you have immured her here, buried her, to satisfy your incredibly gigantic selfishness. I am ashamed to think that I have taken your hand—eaten your bread. I am humiliated in my own eyes.”

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He went a little way toward the door of the room, but halted there, looking back. Pender Fleming's gross body was shaken grotesquely by silent weeping—a dreadful sight—and tears ran down his white face and dripped from the pendent jowls. He wept openly and unashamed, made no effort even to wipe his eyes. But when the other man turned with that abrupt movement and went toward the door, he gave a sudden hoarse cry, and stretched out his hands. He seemed unable to rise. He called upon Beau Temple by name, desperately, but the voice went little beyond a whisper. He said:

“Wait! wait! For God's sake, Beau, don't turn away from me now! I can't—I have no one! No one! You don't understand! All these years—haunted! I've been haunted, devil-ridden! I can't—all in a moment! Give me time! I must think! You don't know how incredibly bitter—

“His son!” the man cried. The words wrenched themselves out of a sheer physical agony. “Creighton Blake's son! I can't, Beau! Don't you see I can't? First Bianca—then the child! It would kill me!” He seemed to see a further movement of the man across the room, for he gave another cry and struggled half out of his chair.

“Give me time! A little time! Don't turn away from me, Beau! Don't desert me! I love the child! She's all I have! I'll—try! I'll try! Only give me time to think!”

Temple watched him coldly. He was still very

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angry and he had small pity upon the man, but he had the sense to see that Pender was on the verge of collapse—that no more could be got out of him for the time being.

“When you are ready to give Vittoria back her promise,” said he, “you can send for me and I will come. Until that time I shall not again set foot in your house.” He seemed to be about to say more, but after a moment shook his head and turned away. So the door closed, and Pender Fleming was left alone—his only friend gone from him in anger.

XIX

LE PHILOSOPHE

TEMPLE saw Vittoria for no more than a few brief moments when he came out from that stormy interview with her father. He had not meant to see her at all. He had meant to slip away unnoticed, but as he was mounting his horse under the *porte cochère* at the side of the house, she came up from the gardens and saw him. So he sent away the stable-boy and waited.

Vittoria hastened to where he was, and stood by the horse, laying a hand on the bridle. She looked up at Temple, and saw that his face was flushed and stern, with glittering eyes. The man was still thoroughly angry, with a depth of anger which seldom entered his quiet life, and so, when it came, was slow to depart.

"What has happened, Beau?" she asked, gazing up at him anxiously. "I've never before seen you look like that. What is it?" He gave her a wry smile.

"Oh, I've been having it out with Pender. We spoke some rather frank words—at least, I did."

"Having it out with him?" She wondered. And Temple said:

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"About you and Richard Blake and—your promise. Pender's a Shylock. It was hard for me to keep my hands off him."

She said, "Oh!" in a very low voice, and bent her head, so that her face was hidden from the man who sat above her. After a moment she shook her head.

"There's no one like you, Beau," said she. "No one in this world. No one! But it's no good, you know. I promised faithfully. And even if—well, if I should ever be sorry I did it—want my promise back—he'd never give it me. Did you think he would? Oh, you don't know him! He'd die first. He'd—rather see me dead than—than *that*. He told me so once, and he meant it.

"Ah, Beau!" she cried, looking up to him again—and there were tears upon her beautiful face—"to think of you doing this for me! Is there no selfishness in you at all, Beau! Are you all unselfish—always?"

The man gave a brief, awkward laugh.

"You ought to know that I'm not. Hasn't all this wretched business—or all the latter part of it—come from my blind selfishness? Of course it has. If I hadn't begged you to be so insane as to marry me you'd have been free when Blake came here. You'd never have made that idiotic promise. You'd—Oh, I've been altogether at fault—a bungling, meddlesome ass! See what has come of it! Do you wonder I want to do what I can to patch it up? Don't talk rubbish about unselfishness. It's remorse.

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"Well, Pender and I have had a most ruffianly time in yonder, and I lost my temper and slanged him like a bargee, and Heaven knows what it will end in! I think I frightened him a bit, anyhow—and that's wholesome. I told him I'd never set foot in his house again until he gave you back your promise."

"Beau! Beau!" cried the girl. "You didn't? You never told him that!"

"Yes, I did, too!" said the man, with some retrospective relish. "And I meant it. If Pender has become the sort of man who will do so inhumanly wicked a thing as to hold you to that promise out of sheer hatred and revenge—if he's that sort of a man, I don't care to have anything more to do with him. I'm done with him forever."

Vittoria began to cry. But, then, she could cry and be beautiful still—and few women can achieve that.

"Then I'm to lose you altogether, Beau? I'm to see no more of you? I think I wish I were dead."

"Good Lord, child!" he exclaimed. "Good Lord, no! What an idea! Nothing of the sort. Of course we're to go on as before. You'll take notice that I said I'd never again set foot in Pender's house. I said nothing about his garden, and I said nothing about your setting your feet in my house. I should think not!" His face turned grave.

"I can't tell how this thing will turn out. I frightened him. I stirred him a little. That I'm

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sure of. But who knows Pender Fleming? Not I. I think the man is almost insane—a monomaniac—obsessed by everlasting hatred and thirst for vengeance. He has lost all sense of proportion. His grief and his resentment and his hatred loom so large before him, through coddling them all these years, that everything else looks small and unimportant—even you—even your happiness. We must use every effort we can to break him down now, but if he sticks it out we must find some way of getting you free of his clutches later on. You're of age, and you have your mother's little fortune. There's no reason why you should continue to be immured with a madman. There are the Farings, there's your cousin Catharine Dudley—plenty more. You can at least live a human life, and let Pender growl to himself in his cave. As for the promise—well, I'm not so sure that promises extorted in excitement and in ignorance of all the facts need be binding. When you made that one you didn't know what you know now. You thought the right in that old matter was all on your father's side. I don't think a promise made under such conditions is worth much. Eh?"

Vittoria shook her head.

"A promise is a promise, Beau. I gave my word very solemnly. I shall never break it. It's infinitely good and sweet of you to try to make it easy for me—help my conscience out, but—no, I couldn't break a solemn promise made to my own father. If I didn't know all the circumstances, at least I knew

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perfectly well what I was promising. I'll never break it."

"No," said Beau Temple, with a little sigh. He looked down at her, shaking his head, and smiled.

"I suppose you won't," said he. "There's a bit of Pender in you, after all—stern stuff. Italian sunshine and New England granite make an odd combination, don't they? They must have a terrible time together. Thank God, the granite's deep down out of sight, anyhow!" He gathered up the reins.

"I must be getting back to my hill. For a quiet and peace-loving old soul I seem to have had rather a war-like day." He held down one hand, and the girl took it in both hers, and laid her cheek against it.

"Don't you go mourning and blubbering, now!" said he. "We shall find a way out of all this, somehow. I pledge my word." He leaned abruptly from his saddle and kissed her on the nearest available point, which chanced to be a very small pink ear. Then he clucked to the patient beast and rode away. And the girl threw kisses after him.

Down beyond the gates of Standish, with his face turned homeward, he pulled up to a walk and rode slowly between the green hedge-rows, drooping a little in the saddle, his hands clasped before him, his head bent. He became aware that he was prodigiously tired—weary to the point of exhaustion. It was the truth that he had spoken to Vittoria. For so quiet and peace-loving a soul the day had been

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a very war-like one to him, had told upon him heavily. He was not used to such days.

Oddly, however, and perhaps fortunately, the sequence of the day's events had spared him somewhat, for the flame and ensuing heat of his anger toward Pender Fleming masked, for the time, that sense of loss irreparable which later on he would have to envisage and accustom himself to. He was aware of that, also, as he rode slowly homeward, with the warmth of the sun upon him—nodded his head over it, was glad of it. It was something gained, since the first hours of grief or loss are bitterest. In some fashion battle must be renewed with the master of Standish; somehow Pender must be overthrown, the girl set free to follow where her heart led. There lay interest and occupation for some time to come, with little opportunity for repining. He saw himself, with a brief grin, for something like a general after a defeat—recasting his losses, reviewing what was left to him, looking already to the future and what might be in store. And once, after a space of this, the man smote his hands together, to the nervous undoing of the gray nag, and said aloud, very earnestly:

“She shall have her life! By God, she shall have her life, Pender or no Pender!” By which it is made plain that Temple's own woes were seldom first with him.

Arrived at Lone Tree Hill, he dismounted, and entered the screened porch at the side of the house. The blind man De Coucy was there, with a blind

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man's book of raised print upon his knees. He looked up with a smile, exclaiming:

"C'est toi, mon vieux?" Temple said:

"Oui," and let himself heavily down into a chair that creaked protest under him. He drew a sigh and took his head into his hands. His voice sounded flat and dry.

"Dieu, comme je suis fatigué!—Au bout de mes forces!"

The Frenchman did not answer, but seemed to wait, and, after a pause, Temple said:

"My old friend, I have in this one day cemented a friendship, given up a hope which I have cherished very dearly for a long time, and quarrelled, perhaps beyond repair, with a comrade. It has been an eventful day for me."

"Mon tres cher ami," said M. de Coucy, "let us hope that the friendship gained may more than compensate for that lost, and that the hope abandoned, pour le bon motif, may bestow blessings that will make you glad to the end of your days!"

The other man looked up at him with a pallid curiosity, wondering how much he knew, and after a moment the Frenchman went on:

"I have asked no questions, and I ask none now. You have told me little, but I know that you have been sad. I know that another, also, has been sad. We of the darkened world have much leisure—reflect, put two with two, and make four. I think you will be glad of this sacrifice. One of the pleas-

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antest things I know of in this world is the fact that sacrifice brings, in almost every instance, its own reward; for the keenness of desire must, of necessity, dull with time—become no more than a memory, but the good done by the sacrifice remains.”

“If it is truly a good,” said Beau Temple. “One might make mistakes.”

“Are you in doubt?”

“No! No, I cannot doubt. It was the only thing to do. . . . But I shall be lonely, Raoul. I shall be very lonely.”

“You have your work,” said the Frenchman. “What would have become of that in—the other event? I have thought about that, and wondered and grieved. You are an artist. You have obligations—serious ones. I think one has hardly the right to shirk them. It is old, and trite—tout ce qu’il-y-a du plus banal—the doctrine that the good artist must make mistress and wife, children, family, friends of his art, but I am afraid it is true. To create, one must suffer. The well-fed canary does not sing, nor the fat hound hunt. That is a *reductio ad absurdum*, but it also is true, like most trite sayings. And, besides—”

“Well?”

“You have certain memories, *mon vieux*, to go through life with.”

Beau Temple drew a sharp breath.

“Yes,” said he, in a whisper. “Ah yes! . . . They will carry me through this life, I think.”

XX

NIGHT IN THE WALLED GARDEN—LOVE SPREADS HIS SAILS

VITTORIA passed the remainder of that afternoon in her walled garden alone with Mr. Hennessy. She did not read the magazines that she had brought out for the purpose, nor devour the little box of Russian chocolates, but sat quite still on one of the benches, her hands clasped in her lap, her eyes fixed, not as eyes that see, upon the opposite wall. From time to time Mr. Hennessy made timid overtures to her—a hesitant paw, a cold, damp nose upstretched toward the still hands—but his mistress paid him no attention whatever, and after a long while he curled up at her feet as philosophically as is possible for an Irishman, and dreamed that he was chasing all the cats in the world, and that, despite their overwhelming numbers, they fled from him in utter consternation, and he caught them one by one and slew them amid sanguinary rivers—a very Waterloo—of cats. He quivered with joy as he slept, and once or twice emitted low barks of proud defiance, and his legs twitched as he thought he ran,

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but Vittoria neither saw nor heard. Her eyes and her mind were far away.

She wished very much that she might see Béatrix Faring, and she would have proposed herself for dinner at Cedar Hill, but Richard Blake was there, and it could not be done. So at last, when the sun was low and it was near dinner-time, she rose, a little stiff from long sitting in one position, and went up to the house to dress.

She expected to dine alone, because she was quite sure that her father, after that violent scene with Beau Temple, would remain in his own part of the house, but, very much to her surprise, he appeared at the table. He looked wretchedly ill, even whiter than usual, and, if it can be said of a man so gross in figure, haggard and thin. There were hollows beside his temples, and the skin of his face seemed to hang loosely upon the bones, so that there were new vertical folds and creases. It was rather horrible. Vittoria exclaimed over his altered appearance, and, womanlike, wanted to dose him with something, but the man checked her with his usual impatience, insisting that he was as well as he had ever been, and she dared say no more.

They had a curious hour together. Pender Fleming seemed to have come out of his retreat for a definite purpose. It was as if he were attempting, at the expense of great labor, to ingratiate himself with his daughter—make himself agreeable to her—speak her language. He talked of her season in

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New York, hinted at a repetition of the visit in the following year, asked questions as to the changes in town since his last visit, years gone by. He spoke warmly of Catharine Dudley and of the Farings, and inquired about Aunt Arabella Crowley, whom he had once known; but said never a word of Beau Temple nor of Richard Blake, nor of anything which could reasonably bring up their names.

It was a remarkable effort, far the most elaborate that Pender had ever made, and Vittoria received it with as good a grace as she could muster, though she was astonished and puzzled almost beyond speech. She could not at all imagine what reason the man had for this new trend—what purpose he had in view—since, of course, there must be a purpose of some kind. And once or twice she made a feeble opening for explanations if he chose to make any, but her father either saw no openings, or, seeing, refused to be led into them. He remained, as ever, enigmatic—a problem beyond solving, and, as it were, she gave him up. She was a little touched by his effort, but she was more than a little suspicious of it. It came too late, by several years, to bear with it any conviction of honesty.

After dinner, when, to her relief, she was left alone, she played for a while at the piano—Chopin and some little German songs, and the Grieg *Peer Gynt* music, after that began to read M. Anatole France's *L'Île des Pingvins*, which had come in the post the day before, and about eleven o'clock went

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up-stairs. She was not in the least sleepy, but mechanically got through the usual preparations for the night and went to bed, because there seemed to be nothing else to do.

Once there, she lay wide-eyed, fronting the dark—and sleep would have none of her. Her mind was a battle-ground whereupon a vast relief and a sort of shamed and secret joy fought with deep depression. For the hour depression seemed to have the better of it—weighed darkly, heavily upon her. Her father's strange bearing had filled her with vague dread, but there was more than that. There was Beau Temple.

She gave a little sob in the dark. It was very bitter to her to have failed Beau after all those years of care and tenderness and affection. It hurt her sorely. And it was bitter also to think how she had let him go, almost without a word. Looking back upon the afternoon, it seemed to her that she had hardly spoken at all after that moment of shock and terror, in which the Beau she had known and loved so well had all at once become a stranger to her. She had been too stunned for words—excuses—apologies. She had let him go, and the man, faithful even through his dark hour, had gone to plead for her—fight her battles—win for her a happiness he could never share. Her heart bled for him. She sorrowed for his sorrow, but she knew that there could be no going back. The thing which had come between them, thrusting them apart, stood there yet,

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and she shivered a little to think of it. Beau could never again be quite the same to her. She could never quite forget.

Rather oddly her mind went back to that time—only a few days before, but it seemed months to her—when she had spent a week deliberating over his proposal and looking forward to a probable marriage with him. She almost laughed, but not for mirth, as she remembered with what dispassionate calm she had contemplated the change in their relations, how she had felt sure that from much reading of books and a little reflection over them she was prepared for all that might be in store. The change from fatherly or brotherly friend to lover had seemed to her then a very simple thing—tenderness grown more tender, perhaps—intimacy more intimate, but unaltered in kind.

Then the terrible moment, and the fear, and the repulsion!

She began to tremble a little with fear of Love. If Love came bearing that dreadful face, could she ever meet him with gladness—open arms? Must there not always rise in her the panic of terror, the instinct to struggle and escape?

She tried to imagine that Love had come in the person not of Beau Temple, but of another. And she remembered that he had come once, and her heart began to beat very fast indeed, and she felt that her face was flushing hot in the darkness.

If Love should come again!

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She gave a little cry, and suddenly clasped her hands together over her eyes, as if to shut out the sight of something. And after a while she said aloud:

"Never! Never! Never!" For she knew in whose person Love must come to her, if he ever came, and she had forsworn that Love very solemnly. She had given her solemn promise, and she would never break that. Beau Temple had been right. There was a bit of Pender in her—New England granite, that the sun of Italy might warm but could not melt.

Vittoria lay still in her bed for a while longer, her eyes very wide open, seeing, no one may say what; but at last sat up, found her fleece-lined *mules* by groping for them at the bedside, and so rose to her feet. At first she thought she would make a light, but gave that over and began to move about the room in the darkness, which was not gloomy, for the windows were open, so that she could see the vague shapes of the chairs and tables round her. She stood for an instant with her hands upon the marble mantel, and looked up to where her beautiful mother sat hidden in the night—hidden, but as sleepless as Vittoria herself, leaning forward, with one lovely arm laid along the back of the seat, the other across her knees, her eyes straining through the darkness to meet her daughter's eyes, her lips parted in speech. Vittoria knew what the speech was. She heard it as if it had been a real and physical voice—"When Love calls, answer and go!"

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The girl shook her head a little sadly, but without bitterness.

"If only I might, my dearest dear!" said she. "But I cannot go."

She turned away across the room to one of the open windows. The cool breath of the night came in there, and it was sweet and grateful to her. She fetched a cushion and set it upon the floor of the tiny balcony without the window. And she knelt down and laid her arms upon the low balcony-rail before her, and lifted her hot face to the night's fresh kiss.

There was a waning moon to the west, but now and then a cloud drifted slowly across its face and the silver light fled from the fields and trees beneath. There were stars in millions, cold and blue, and, lower, among the tree-tops very far away, a few yellow pin-points of light from the village. The barely perceptible breeze came from that direction, and, as the girl knelt upon her balcony, there reached her ears a faint sound of chimes—the very ghost of a sound—and afterward a single clear bell. One o'clock.

Beneath her the gardens slept dark and still, but that barely perceptible breeze bore up the scent of roses and of all the green growing things. She felt a sudden poignant desire to be down there close to the earth, where everything was cool and fresh and odorous, where the dew lay on the close-clipped turf, and the roses hung pallid and strange in the moonlight.

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She knew that there would be no one to see her, for the household was long since abed and asleep, and even the dogs were in their kennels. She gave a little laugh in the dark, and rose at once and turned back into the room.

She put on a thin dressing-gown, a sort of kimono, and went noiselessly out and down to a certain door at the side of the house which she knew was merely bolted at night, not locked with a key. Then in a moment more she was in the open, across the drive which encircled the house, and moving down the gravel path through the gardens. She came to the walled enclosure which was her very own, and which she loved, and her roses leaned to her out of the gloom at either side. The fountain gurgled and dripped in the midst of the place, and stars swam reflected in the oblong pool. At either side two broad beech-trees threw a circle of inky darkness, and their leaves stirred over it, gray in the moonlight. A little drowsy bird cheeped once from somewhere out of sight, and another answered it more drowsily still and rustled the leaves where it was.

Vittoria put off the bedroom-shoes, and stood with her naked feet upon the wet turf. A tingling thrill of coolness and life ran up through her from feet to head, and it seemed to work a sort of magic upon her. It seemed to her that she became a part of that sweet and fragrant garden and of the moonlit night—an enchanted being in a world of make-belief. It seemed to her that a horn should wind

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far away in the wood, and that her fairy-prince lover should ride toward her into the moonlight, and leap from his horse and come and kneel at her feet. She looked back toward the iron gate in the wall, and remembered how Richard Blake had come in through it and gone out by it once more. She wondered if the little gate would ever again swing open to his hand, and her heart gave a sudden strange, fierce throb of longing, and tears stung in her eyes.

At first she thought that the tears and the moonlight and her foolish fancies had conspired together to deceive her, and she began a little nervous laugh and shook her head, but in the end she caught her two hands up over her mouth to check the scream which rose there, and stood motionless, staring, while the gate in the wall stirred, as she had tried to imagine, and opened noiselessly and closed again behind some one who had entered.

The man turned, his face in the moonlight, and, when he looked before him, raised one arm over his eyes. But after a moment he came forward very slowly, step by step, and Vittoria heard the breath hiss between his teeth and knew that he thought her a phantom. He put out one hand, with an odd, stiff gesture, and touched her arm, but at that human touch he fell back again with a sound that was like a sob, and, for a moment, covered his face, shaking all over. When at last he could speak, he said, whispering:

“I meant—you not to know. I meant just to come

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and—sit for a little while in your garden. I wanted to see the house where you were sleeping. Only that. I didn't mean you to know. I swear I didn't mean you to know! I should have gone away presently."

She said:

"Yes, I know. I believe you. It's not your fault." She found that her breath was coming in strange, silent gasps, as if the air had suddenly grown very thin.

"Only," she said, "you must go away, please. You shouldn't have come—or, I'll go back into the house."

She turned unsteadily, but the man was before her, his arms outstretched wide. He said:

"No! No! Not yet. A little moment first. Just a little moment! Since by some miracle we are here together, stay with me a moment more. It can do no harm."

Enchantment was all round and about her. She breathed it into her lungs. The moonlight, the soft air, the breath of roses—they were a spell upon her: the sight of the man before her and the sound of his hushed voice a part of the spell. Almost she became convinced that she was moving in a dream—that nothing mattered. She found herself passive—without the will or the power to move.

"I must go back into the house," she said, but she did not go. She was conscious of an odd sense of great bodily weakness.

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"Vittoria," said Richard Blake, "I talked with Beaumont Temple to-day." And she nodded.

"Yes, I know. I did, too. He told me."

"He has set you free."

"Yes," she said, whispering.

"Vittoria," said he, "I love you. I can tell you so now—openly—without shame or dishonor. I love you."

Vittoria gave a little sob. And again she said, whispering:

"I know. I know. Oh!" she said, "I'm glad. I'm so glad! It is very sweet to me to know that you love me. I wanted you to say it. Please say it again. It will help me so—to go on with. It will make my life so beautiful."

She saw the man's quick frown in the moonlight.

"What do you mean," he demanded, "by my love 'helping you—to go on with'? What do you mean by that?"

She uttered a little cry.

"Didn't Beau Temple tell you about the promise I made to my father?"

"Oh yes!" said Richard Blake. "He told me about that. Do you expect me to take it seriously? Do you think I'm going to lose you forever because you made an absurd promise when you didn't even know the facts of the case?"

"A promise is a promise," said she, soberly. "If you knew me better, you'd know that I couldn't even think of breaking it." He came closer to her, until

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he was within arm's-length, gazed anxiously into her face, that was white and very beautiful in the moonlight.

"Do you love me—even a little, Vittoria?"

"I have never loved any one else," she said, bravely, and did not take her eyes from his. "I never shall. I think I have loved you from the beginning, and I know I shall love you to the end, but I can never marry you. No! Wait! Listen to me! It is more than just the fact of a promise that comes between us. It's—obedience—duty—good faith. You know how my father feels. And it is not altogether preposterous. They—wronged him deeply, and he has never got over it. He never will. I am all he has in the world. If I should leave him and marry you I am almost sure that it would kill him. I should have killed my father to gain my own happiness. You cannot conceive how deeply he feels about it all. Beau Temple talked with him—tried to win him over—even quarrelled with him beyond repair, I am afraid. But I know that it came to nothing. My father has lost his best—almost his only—friend rather than give way. He *cannot* give way. He has forgotten how."

The man made a strong effort at self-control, and for the moment achieved it. He put his hands behind him.

"Vittoria," said he, "what do you think it is that has brought us two together—your mother's daughter and my father's son?"

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"I suppose it must be Fate," she said—"whatever that is."

"Then Fate," said Richard Blake, "will go on working, and your father will have to give way before it. He cannot fight long against Fate. No one can. Meanwhile—

"Ah!" he cried, "it is unbearable. I will not give you up! I cannot. Do you think I will go on through my life loving you, knowing that you love me back, and let it end there? It's impossible, I tell you. Has not that—that—has not your father had enough sacrificed to him already? Was not your mother's life until near the end—is not your own life, shut up here away from the world—are not they enough? Is this man a god, that lives upon lives should be sacrificed to him? Vittoria, it's too much. We're young, you and I. The best of our lives is before us. Your father is an old man. He had his chance in life, and lost it through his own acts. Don't let him play Moloch to you and to me! He has already had more than he deserves. Don't let a foolish promise—a half-dozen words spoken in excitement—wreck us forever. It's not fair. It's not just."

Vittoria covered her face.

"Oh, Richard, Richard, don't tempt me! You make it seem so easy, so right, to break my word. But I know it isn't right. We can't do that. They robbed him, my mother and your father. Whatever they suffered, whatever my poor mother had to

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endure—and I shall never forgive my father for it—still they ruined his life. Glad as I am that they went away and had their little year of happiness, still I know that they wrecked him utterly. We're hostages of their sin, Richard. We must suffer for what they did. The sins of the fathers! We suffer for them. Ah, my dear, don't tempt me. Don't make it harder for me than it is. Help me to do what I must do!"

He looked upon her with haggard and with bitter eyes, yet with pride in her very inflexibility. She was stronger than he, and he loved her for it. He drew a great sigh.

"I can't fail you," he said, "when you plead with me. You shame me. I'll say no more. There will come times when living without you will be unbearable, and I shall make insane plans for storming Standish and carrying you off, whether you want to go or not. There will come times like that." He gazed at her reflectively.

"And, you know," said he, "it isn't improbable that one day I shall do it. I'm not a very civilized person. One day it will be plain to me that you and I are leading empty and ruined lives just for a scruple—a word—a point of fantastic honor. Then I shall do something, I warn you. I can endure a good deal on my own account, but I don't know yet how much I can endure on yours. If I should see you very unhappy—very wretched—living on, year after year, as a useless, wicked sacrifice to a mad-

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man, I—well, I think I couldn't stand that. We shall see."

The man's brows were drawn into a frown, but it was not an angry frown. There was no passion in him just then. He really seemed to be looking forward with perfect seriousness to that not improbable day of which he spoke—to be wondering calmly about it, and his aspect lent the words an extraordinary air of reasonableness. Despite herself, Vittoria thrilled to them.

"But I put my faith," he went on, "in the Fate that has moved us already so far—wrought miracles in our behalf. Too many extraordinary things have happened to us to be mere chance. That we should ever have met at all was strange enough. All the rest is stranger still."

Vittoria put out her hands to him with a little laugh that was not of mirth but of tenderness.

"Lovers' talk, my dear!" said she. "Lovers' talk! Were there ever two people who loved each other and didn't think unprecedented miracles had been worked for them—and for them alone? . . . Well, maybe it's so. Maybe miracles are worked for lovers. What better thing could they be for? Let's be grateful for our miracles!" Blake would have echoed her laughter, but the effort died in its beginning, and he stood silent, save for one very long, deep breath, looking at her where she stood in the moonlight before him. She must have been astonishingly beautiful in that hour, clad in her thin,

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straight-hanging garments, with her black hair in two great braids down before her shoulders, and her little naked feet white upon the turf.

The hands she had stretched out to him he took in his, and he went down upon his knees before her, and held her hands to his face. He might have been, in very truth, that fairy-prince lover who had ridden to her through the night. Vittoria gave a little low cry and moved closer to where he knelt. She bent above him, and the man's face lay against her breast. He both felt and heard her heart beat, and it beat fast and unsteadily.

In every very great love there is the passion to fight for and shield and protect the object of that love, even against one's own self, and this passion rose in the man and was for the time above all else. Vittoria was alone with him, and she trusted him, and she loved him very dearly, as only the entirely innocent can do, without question or reserve. He would have killed himself rather than prove unworthy of her trust just then.

She raised herself upright, not moving away, and the man laid his arms about her, so that she stood before him within their circle. She held his head with her two little hands.

"Why don't you speak to me?" she said at last, in her half-whisper.

"Is there anything to say?" he asked. "I can think of nothing, except that I love you so that I am blind and speechless, and there's no strength in me.

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I think no one ever loved any one so much before."

She stirred in his arms and laughed above him—a little laugh of divine tenderness.

"Lovers' talk, my dearest!" she said again. "Every lover in all the world has said that—and, I hope, meant it. Ah, but I love you to say it to me! Say it again! Say it again!"

"I love you more than any one ever loved any one before!" he said, without a spark of humor—a little edge of fierceness in his tone.

"And I don't care," he said, "whether or not other people have said the same words. They're true for us only. The other people didn't know."

Her hands lay upon his eyes, cool and very sweet.

"It is so beautiful to be loved!" she said. "Ah, dearest, pity loveless men and women! They don't know what sunshine is. They live in the dark. I pity them. Swear to me that you'll love me always!"

"A foolish, poor oath!" said he. "I could not live without loving you. It's all my life, and I am in a panic when I think how short life is at best. It won't hold even a little part of the love I have for you." Her hands slipped from his eyes to his shoulders, and he lifted his face toward her, white in the moonlight and very grave.

"Never doubt how much I love you!" he said. "It is all of me. It's my blood—and 'the blood is the life.' I'm not speaking lovers' speech. I'm speaking the sober, calm truth."

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He got slowly to his feet, and they stood for a little time silent, face to face, in the moonlit gloom. The scent of the roses was all about them—cool and sweet—mysteriously enchanting, as all odors are in the dark; the softest of all soft airs stirred against their faces; they heard the small splash of water from the goldfish-pool. The same thought came to them both in the same instant, and they met it with the helpless embarrassment of two children. Their first kiss hung between them, impalpable but imminent—gigantic in its importance, and a little terrifying.

Suddenly Blake held out his arms. The girl drew a quick breath, and for a moment she stood still. Then she went into the arms he outstretched to her, and the arms closed round her strongly, and she lifted her beautiful face to his, and he kissed her lips.

Afterward they clung together speechless and a little dazed, Vittoria's face in the hollow of Blake's shoulder, her hair against his cheek. And so they remained for a time which may have been minutes, but neither of them knew.

It was the man who roused himself at last with a quick sigh. He became aware of how thinly covered Vittoria was, and that her shoulders and arms were chill through the silk of her dressing-gown. He said:

"My dear love, you must go in. You will take cold here in the damp. I've been a brute to keep you so long. You must go in at once. She looked at him with absent eyes—a faint, fixed smile—and

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he knew that she scarcely heard him, that words could hardly reach her through the spell in which she stood enwrapped.

He took her head between his two hands, looking his last upon her, close through that fragrant gloom. He saw her eyes, very wide and dark, and her parted lips. It seemed to him that she had well-nigh stopped breathing. He said:

"Go, now!" Vittoria nodded slowly.

"Yes, I'll go. I'll go."

"And my love with you!" cried Richard Blake, beginning to tremble. "My love and my life with you."

She smiled upon him divinely, but she stood still, and he saw that he must be the first to go. He turned away, but came back for an instant, saying:

"There's something you ought to know. My father, who started some weeks ago for the South Pacific, has come back—or will be back in a couple of days. He went only as far as Honolulu. A long telegram of mine reached him there, telling him about—my love for you, and about your father's attitude. So he returned to San Francisco. He telegraphed twice—long messages. He is coming to see your father. Perhaps, among us all—I don't know, but perhaps something can be managed."

The girl continued to look at him with that little fixed smile, and he wondered if she had heard anything of what he had said. He asked her:

"Did you hear me? About my father?"

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Once more she nodded.

"Yes, I heard." And so he turned away.

At the gate in the wall he looked back once, and she was standing there still in the moonlight, tall and slender and very beautiful, her arms at her sides, the two great braids of black hair hanging down before her shoulders almost to her knees.

But when he had been gone for some moments Vittoria drew a sigh, and seemed to waken from her spell of dazed enchantment. She found her bedroom-shoes upon the turf near by, thrust her feet into them, and went quietly up through the garden to the open door at the side of the house. There were no lights visible anywhere, the household was asleep and still. No one had been aware of her movements.

She went with dragging feet up to her own chamber and locked the door behind her. Then she cast herself down upon the bed, hiding her face in the pillows, and lay there still till the morning light came in to rouse her.

XXI

THE MAN WHO LIVED IN HELL

THE next three days passed very happily for Vittoria, though they passed almost without event of any kind. She did not see Beau Temple again, for he had been summoned to town on a matter of business. He called her up by telephone to say that he was going, and that he would be back late on the third day. She rode once with Béatrix Faring, and kept that lady at Standish for luncheon; but Mrs. Faring became aware that the girl was not yet ready to talk about her broken engagement or about her relations with Richard Blake, and so held her own tongue, and the conversation was rather stiff and conscious and quite absurd, and she went home earlier than she had meant to do.

So for three days Vittoria was left almost entirely alone, and was glad of it; for she had so much to reflect upon and to think about. It has been said that she was happy, and that is quite true. She was happier than she had ever been before in her life, though she loved with all her heart and soul, with all her conscious being, a man whom she might never hope to marry.

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Women in such matters as these are beyond the simple, forthright comprehension of man, and young girls are beyond the comprehension of anybody—most of all, themselves. Where a man loves he must take possession or he is miserably unhappy—as impatient and as obstreperous as a little child, and he will perform the most incredible feats of ingenuity, or perhaps of valor, to gain that possession. But a woman can love, and wait and wait and dream over her love, and imagine and pretend to herself, and be quite rapturous for months or even for years. It is a very interesting distinction, but it needs a modern German philosopher, and not the present simple-minded scribe, to examine it, and turn the microscope upon it, and write a big book with long words about its mysteries. The present scribe gives it up.

Vittoria was entirely without hope of ever being able to marry Richard Blake, but that could not cloud her beautiful tranquillity. He loved her and she loved him, and that was enough. She had already reached, she said to herself, the utmost vertiginous height to which human love can attain. She was quite sure that there was nothing more. She had only to shut her eyes and the miracle returned upon her. She stood once more in the circle of her lover's arms: they held her fast—so fast that she could not breathe, and she saw his eyes very close above her, and her heart stood still, and he kissed her, and the world about them ceased altogether to exist.

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It seemed to her that this was enough. In that one transforming kiss he had made her his own forever—"sealed" her to him, as the expressive Mormon phrase has it. And she was quite sure that she could go through life very happily, very contentedly, with that knowledge and that memory to live upon. It would be wonderful, of course—incredibly sweet—if she could be with her lover always. She thought of that sometimes, as one might dream of the delights of a material heaven. Sometimes, too, she remembered what he had said about endurance coming to an end, and his storming Standish and carrying her off by main force. She thought of that and thrilled to it, and the well-remembered fierceness of the man's tone waked something of its own kind in her, stirred for an instant mysterious, hitherto-unknown depths. But, for the most part, she thought only of how much more fortunate she was than anybody else in the world, since she had Blake's faithful love.

Yet despite this somewhat sublimated conception she was not altogether unpractical. Few women are. Something Beau Temple had said to her touching the future remained in her mind, and she was quite determined to act upon it. If her father persisted, as she was certain he would do, in his present attitude, she could leave him for at least a large part of each year, and live in town. She would not break her promise to him, and she would not quarrel with him unless he should force the quarrel upon her, but she had not promised to remain buried in the

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country forever, and now that a way of escape had been pointed out, she meant to avail herself of it. The fortune that her mother had left to her was not large as fortunes go nowadays, but it was not small either. Its income would be enough and more than enough for her wants. The Farings, she knew, would be glad to have her for as long as she would stay with them, and so would Catharine Dudley, and so would two or three others. She could even travel to her heart's content when any of these friends were travelling, and later on, as she grew older, she could find some nice elderly woman who was alone in the world and have a house of her own.

So, as she looked down the years which were to come, she found that, after all, she might live, in most respects, a very normal sort of life, and might see a great deal of Richard Blake. It seemed to her, as she thought of it, very satisfying—very delightful, and the fact that she was leaving Richard Blake's possibly different views out of her consideration never once occurred to her.

As for Pender Fleming, during these three days no one ever knew what he felt or endured, in what manner he passed his gray or black hours. For that matter, no one knew how the man had passed the greater part of twenty years. Outwardly he sat in his book-lined study through the day and far into the night, or at intervals took long and solitary walks across the hills to the northward. But inwardly?

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No one knew about that. Even Beaumont Temple, who had sat with the man, argued and disputed with him over matters logical or sometimes political, even he only guessed—only remembered and inferred and made his surmises. And yet, though no one could speak from knowledge, though even Temple could only look on and guess, it is certain that this man's life was terrible, a haunted life full of bitterness so black that there are no words for it, full of wrecked and outraged love, of high pride trampled in the dust, of a still fury of hatred almost beyond measure.

The word "hell" is overused, ragged, outworn. It has been tossed about so lightly that it no longer means much, but if for a moment it could be refurbished and restored to something like its old vigor, it would be the one word to set opposite Pender Fleming's life. One could say: "This man's life was a hell," meaning a place of spiritual torments more awful than can be described.

It will be remembered that the man must always have been a violent and passionate man, altogether intolerant of the wills of those about him, intolerant of their likes and dislikes, of their hopes and fears and imaginings when these did not appeal to himself. He must have had the savage and primitive sense of possession which such men always have, and he must have had also their curious and poignant shame over giving voice to such love and tenderness as may be in their hearts. Such natures sometimes love very

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deeply, but it is an agony to them to express their love.

All this is not meant by way of excuse for Pender Fleming. There is no possible excuse for the astounding selfishness of his life. It is more by way of explanation of that almost insane fury of his, of his conduct toward Richard Blake and toward his own daughter.

And, after all, once the man's character is understood and granted, this second blow of Fate, after twenty years, must be acknowledged to be a shrewd blow. He had, so to speak, dedicated his life to hatred. He had immured himself with almost the completeness of an anchorite, in his passionate desire to have done with that world which had wrecked him. Fancifully, we may see Pender Fleming going down the long, slow corridor of progress to the grave with two visions painted before him on the gloom—the picture of his one love and the likeness of the man who had robbed him. To keep the former picture fresh before him stands Vittoria, so amazingly like her mother. Suddenly, thereupon, to make the other vision to breathe and speak after twenty years, rises the son of Creighton Blake, and the second Bianca turns to him, as her mother to the man she loved, as naturally as a flower to the sun.

It was a shrewd blow Fate dealt to Pender Fleming there—incredibly shrewd. Yes, it may safely be said that he dwelt in hell.

He did not appear again at table after that first

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evening. (Can it have been that he realized his ill-success?) And Vittoria had no more speech with him. But once or twice during the three days she saw him out-of-doors, walking alone upon the hills to the north of Standish. So it may be that his familiar room had become unbearable to him. Once he seems to have had a moment of weakness—was it actual surrender? No one can say. He called up Lone Tree Hill by telephone and asked if Mr. Temple was at home. He did not ask to speak to him, merely asked if he was at home, and refused to give a name. But the servant with whom he spoke knew the voice, and said that his master was in New York. Whereupon, as the servant said afterward, "Mr. Fleming didn't seem to be exactly disappointed, sir. He seemed to be relieved, as you might say, sir."

This was on the second day, and later in the same afternoon, Pender, wandering solitary across the green uplands, fell in with an acquaintance—the Frenchman De Coucy.

XXII

THE FOUNDATIONS ARE SHAKEN—

THE blind Frenchman was riding to take the air, and he was attended, as usual, by a servant who rode close beside, and held his master's horse upon a leading-rein. Pender Fleming paused at the top of the roadside-bank to let them pass. It would have been like him to stand there in silence, or even to retreat from view, but—he can hardly have been quite himself—he spoke, a simple “Good-afternoon,” and the blind man, who had a blind man's unerring memory for voices, gave a direction to his servant, and the two reined in.

There passed commonplace words of greeting, perfunctory praises of the weather, which had remained miraculously fine, and M. de Coucy apologized for not having called in person at Standish after lunching there. (He had sent cards by Beau Temple the next day.)

“The good Beau would not permit it,” he explained. “He told me that you were always deep in your books, and hated to be torn from them. So I did not come.”

“I am sorry,” Pender Fleming said. “I should

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have been glad of your call. Beau is apt to exaggerate. I hope you will take my word for his, and come when you find an idle afternoon." In the ordinary course of things this geniality would have partaken of the miraculous, but both Beau Temple and Vittoria had noted with some surprise how Pender seemed drawn to the blind Frenchman on the one occasion of their meeting. Perhaps it was affliction calling to affliction. Pender never explained it.

"But this is an idle afternoon!" exclaimed De Coucy. "All my afternoons are idle. How if I take you at your very amiable word? Are we far from your Standish? How far?"

"Not above half a mile," said the other. "Will you come now? I shall be glad. Take the first turning to the left, just ahead here, and I will walk beside your horse."

The Frenchman wished to dismount, but Pender would not allow that, and so, politely wrangling, they turned up the near-by lane, and were very soon at Standish.

There Pender Fleming, with a ready tact surprising to see in him, led his guest in through the house, guiding his steps with an unobvious hand upon the blind man's arm, quite as one might do with a man whose sight was perfect. He led him to that vast, dim study at the north, and pulled out a comfortable chair for him. De Coucy breathed the cool air of the place and nodded.

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"You have books here," said he. "Many books in leather bindings. This will be where you live and read. But," he complained, "there is no sunshine. The sun never comes here. Why is that?"

"I am a bird of dark plumage, monsieur," said Pender Fleming. "A night-bird. The sun makes me blink. I—feel more at home in the shadows. Darkness and I are friends, I think—if, indeed, I have any friends. You are right, the sun never comes here. It is the north side of the house."

The Frenchman sat back in the comfortable chair and laid his elbows upon the arms of it, joining his finger-tips neatly together before him. He nodded his head.

"Yes," said he. "Yes, indeed. And yet—I am a sort of night-bird, too, I suppose. Shadows and I are bedfellows if not friends. But I love the sunshine still. It warms me. I think that if I were never in the sun I should grow dark inside, and bitter and cold—like a cellar. I think we need the sun to keep us clean and sweet—as rooms do." He smiled across at his host, and Pender Fleming was once more amazed, as he had been at their first meeting, to observe how perfectly normal the man's appearance and bearing were. Most blind people, even when the eyes show no injury, betray their affliction by never moving the eyeballs or by the pose of their heads—thrown back a little in a listening attitude; but De Coucy's eyes moved as if they saw, and he

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held his head as normal people do. There was not the slightest sign to be seen in him of his infirmity, except, perhaps, that he seemed to listen with more than usual care, as if his ears were doing double duty. Doubtless they were.

The host proffered a box of cigars, saying:

"You'll find these endurable, I think. They are sent to me from Havana." But the blind man shook his head, smiling.

"Thank you," said he, "we in the dark do not smoke. One cannot taste it, you know." And the other flushed with chagrin over his mistake, and turned away, saying:

"Of course, of course. I forgot."

But when he had lighted his own cigar and had sat down again he looked curiously across at his guest, and the man's unembarrassed reference to his infirmity must have given Pender courage. For he said:

"Tell me! We two have, I think, a good deal in common. We have both lost the best out of our lives, each in his different way, and we have had to go on living, maimed, crippled, set apart from mankind. Tell me! Do you ever long for death to come and end it?"

"Oh yes!" said the Frenchman, readily. "Yes, indeed. I have wished for twenty-five years that I might die. I should be very happy indeed if I knew that I might die to-night—or to-morrow—even if it were to cost great pain. It is not so much my blind-

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ness (though that is a great deal) as the fact that those who made life sweet to me went on ahead very long ago, and when I die I hope to rejoin them. I am a good Christian, though not a Catholic."

"There is the easy way out," said Pender Fleming, and gave a little shiver. But the other man shook his head with great decision.

"No! I shall never resort to that. In the first place, it is a sin, and, in the second place, it is cowardly. I shall go on living until the good God sees fit to let me off. Meanwhile I find the world not insupportable. I have a few good friends who love me, and I retain my curiosity, and I still like a good dinner. I am a cheerful soul, by nature."

"I am not," said Pender Fleming, and for a space his guest was silent, because there seemed to be nothing to say to that. Nevertheless, after a little pause, he said:

"Yet, my friend, you have much to live for. You have your daughter. I am alone in the world, but you have your daughter. Surely there can be no sorrow, no affliction, so overwhelming that it can drown your joy in that sweet and amiable young lady." (A new description of Vittoria!)

Pender Fleming stirred in his chair, but he did not speak, and presently the Frenchman went on. He said:

"I envy you that care—that charge. It is a blessing which has never been granted me. To watch over her—to give her pleasure—to make her life

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happier day by day—surprise her with proofs of love—make sacrifices for her! To devote one's life to making another and younger life beautiful! To see her settled at last where her heart has chosen! (For in that I like your American ways better than ours. I find it charming that the young should follow where their hearts lead them.) In good time to hold one's grandchild upon one's knees! Ah, monsieur, I envy you your privilege. Can you be sorrowful in the face of that? I could not be."

Pender Fleming's face was uplifted and terrible to see. But the blind Frenchman could not see it. He had spoken in all sincerity and in complete ignorance of the facts of the other man's life, for Beau Temple had told him no more than that Pender had lost his wife many years back, and had never recovered from the blow. This was all he knew. He suspected it was Pender Fleming with whom Temple had quarrelled recently, but he did not know even that. Beau's reticence in the matter seems a little extraordinary, but then he was a very reticent man about other people's affairs.

The Frenchman waited a moment for reply or comment from his host, and then went on a little hastily, for it occurred to him that he had doubtless touched the body of an ancient grief, and he was sorry, though, after all, it had been the other man who had first referred to such matters. He said:

"While speaking of your charming daughter, I must tell you about a strange recollection which came

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to me this morning during my ride. When I first met Mademoiselle Fleming, a fortnight ago, I realized that she was curiously like some lady whom I had known long before—many years before. But at that time I could not remember who the lady was or where I had known her. I suppose my memory has gone on working ever since without my conscious direction—as memories so often do—and this morning, apropos of nothing at all, it came to me who that lady was—that I had known her, never at all well and only for a short time, in Paris, nearly twenty years ago. She was, I think, one of the loveliest ladies whom the good God has ever permitted to live for a little while here among us men—to prove to us what sweetness and light there can be—but she had suffered great sorrow and wrong until she could bear it no longer, and love had been stronger than law, and she had left the home which had been made unbearable to her, and had gone away with one who worshipped her faithfully.

“Monsieur, for many years I could not forget that poor lady and the pitiful impression she left upon me. I, who never saw her—but they told me that she was as beautiful as the daylight—as beautiful as the night in summer—could not forget her sweetness and her pain. It is very wonderful that Mademoiselle Fleming, who is scarcely more than a child and who cannot have known deep sorrow, should be so like her. I should like to say that the lady found at last an enduring happiness to make up to her what she had

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suffered, but doubtless it was too late. She had left a little child behind her, monsieur—a little child which her husband had taken from her, saying she was not fit to hold it in her arms. That sweet and pitiful lady not fit! So her heart was broken—and she died. She knew a little happiness for a little time, and then she died. God is at times inscrutable, monsieur. We cannot follow His great plans. We see such little pieces of them!”

With what must have been an incredible effort the other man asked a question—speaking in a sort of whisper, but the Frenchman did not heed the strained tone. His thoughts were afar.

“What was—the name?”

“The name?” De Coucy hesitated an instant. “Ah, well, after all, the lady is dead—God rest her sorrowful soul, and give it light and refreshment!—I suppose there is no reason why I should not speak the name after nearly twenty years. The name was Cromwell.”

“Oh, my God!” said Pender Fleming, in a choked cry. “Oh, my God!” And fell to sobbing, with hard and terrible gasps. It was the name under which Creighton Blake and Bianca had lived during their one year together.

The blind Frenchman sprang to his feet, tingling from head to foot. The blood withdrew from his face, leaving it as white as paper. Illumination burst upon him in a single white flash that was like a flash of lightning. His brain was dazzled with the horror of it.

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"Her daughter!" cried the Frenchman, in an amazed whisper. "Mademoiselle is the child! And you—!" He drew himself up all at once, very stiffly.

"Monsieur," said he, in a sharp tone, "monsieur, I beg that my servant may be called. It is impossible that I should remain here."

There was only the sound of the other's rending sobs—a terrible sound in that still place—and the Frenchman spoke again:

"Monsieur, I have the honor to bid you good-day!" He took a step forward, feeling before him with his riding-crop, and after it another step, moving in the direction of the door. But Pender Fleming controlled himself by some miracle of self-command, and caught the man by the arm.

"No, wait!" said he, trembling. "Wait! Don't judge me until you know. It's not just to give judgment before you know. Bear with me a little while. Let me speak. I am alone in the world. My only friend has turned from me, my daughter has hardened her heart against me. I am alone. Listen for a little while, and then, if you wish, go—with the others."

The Frenchman sat down and took his head into his hands. So Pender Fleming told his story from the beginning, many years before, up to the quarrel with Beaumont Temple and its cause. He told it, of course, from his own side, from his own point of view, but De Coucy made, as it were, a running

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translation—having, to go by, his memory of Donna Bianca and Creighton Blake, his knowledge of Beau Temple and Vittoria, and his own judgment of the man who sat before him.

Even then, he could not be pitiless. He could not but be sorry for this haunted wreck of a man who had suffered so deeply and who had caused so much suffering.

And when the story was done he sat for a long time silent, his sightless eyes fixed upon the floor.

“It is the most astonishing sequence of events that I have ever known,” he said at last. “It is well-nigh incredible—incredible! Did I not speak, a short time ago, of God’s great plans? Here surely is one of them. What God denied to those two, long ago, he was storing up for the younger generation—for her daughter and for his son. It seems to me a great epic of sorrow and love—an epic that is lived instead of written. I am overwhelmed by it.” He turned a stern and earnest face toward his host.

“Sorrow and love!” he repeated. “Sorrow and love! There has been enough sorrow. Too much, Heaven knows! Let the rest be love—and peace—sunlight after shadow—the morning after night. The key is in your hand, monsieur. Stretch out your hand!”

“No! No!” cried Pender Fleming, in a trembling voice. “It is too much! I cannot do it!”

“Cannot do it? You cannot refuse to do it! I will not believe that there is a man living in this

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world who would hesitate to right such a wrong when it was in his power to do it. It is not a duty, it is a sacred privilege—a wonderful thing. Monsieur, you have been the cause of great suffering. You will have one day to answer to God for that. What will you put on the other side of the ledger to balance it? God will require something, assuredly, or it will go hard with your soul, monsieur, when God gives judgment upon you.”

“Is all my world against me?” asked Pender Fleming, in a flat and tired voice. “Is everybody against me?”

“Yes, monsieur,” said the blind Frenchman. “Even God, I think. For surely it was God who brought these two young people together, and He will not tolerate your interference, my friend. You must give way before Him.”

The other shivered, for that was almost exactly what Beau Temple had said, only Beau had called God “Fate,” as have many other people in this and other times. He did not answer. He remained silent for a little while, sitting lax with bowed head. He may have been thinking, or he may have been sunk in a kind of thoughtless apathy. But in the end he asked timidly, a white and haggard eagerness upon his wrung face, some question about Bianca Fleming—or Bianca Cromwell, as she had chosen to be known.

So the Frenchman, who must have divined the man's shamed desire, told all that he knew or could

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remember about poor Bianca's life in France, of her failing health, of Creighton Blake's anguished efforts to save her, and of her final death in the little resort in the Pyrenees, where the two had gone for mountain air. Pender heard him through in silence, his head bent, his hands clasped together—no sign about him of what went on within save that now and then tears dropped from his eyes and rolled down his pendulous cheeks, and they were tears of bitter anguish that burned like drops of molten metal.

But from that De Coucy went on to speak of Bianca's daughter. Despite his stiff and formal English, he was an eloquent man when roused, and he spoke well and appealingly. He drew poignant pictures. He showed how that old blot of sorrow and suffering and sin might be cleansed, wiped away, in the happiness of the younger generation—light born out of darkness—peace out of hatred and despair. He pictured Bianca's daughter, serene and at rest in her home, and he pictured the man of darkness, reborn through high renunciation, going tranquilly down through the remainder of his years—his grandchild on his knee.

He spoke well and shrewdly. He tapped deep and hidden springs there—those springs which in even the bitterest heart are never quite dry. They gushed in Pender Fleming's dark being—rose to his eyes in tears that were no longer drops of molten metal, but rivers of refreshment upon that arid soil. The man laid his arms upon the great table before him, and

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buried his face in them. The very foundations of him stirred and shook, but they did not yet give way. They had been in place too long.

There fell between the two a space of silence. At its end the Frenchman said, gently:

"Give the child back her promise! Let sunlight in after so much darkness!" He rose to his feet, and stood waiting.

"I will—do what I can do," said Pender Fleming, in a broken voice. "Don't press me now. I think I can bear no more to-day. Let me be for a little while."

"There is no time so good as now," said Raoul de Coucy. But the other said, querulously:

"Not now! Not now! I—cannot bear any more, now." He got with some stiffness to his feet, moving like an old and feeble man.

"Come to-morrow! To-morrow we will—settle it all." And after a pause, he said:

"Bring Beau Temple with you if he will come. I quarrelled with him. Tell him I am sorry. Tell him—I ask him to come." And the blind man said:

"I will do that. I will do it with great gladness." He put out his riding-crop, feeling before him, and his host led him by the arm to the door, and called a servant to take him in charge there.

"You will forgive me if I go no farther with you," he said. "I seem to be a little spent—a little spent." So they clasped hands, and the door closed between them.

XXIII

BUT THEY DO NOT FALL

PENDER FLEMING went slowly back across the room, moving feebly still—like a very old man—and sat down before the great table. He was indeed spent, as he had said. He was spent physically, and in mind and soul. It seemed to him that all his being ached with sore fatigue, and he leaned his heavy head upon his hands, and a sound which was like a sigh and a groan together broke from his lips.

“Let sunlight in after so much darkness!” The blind man’s words said themselves over in his mind, and his lips repeated them in a soundless whisper.

“Let sunlight in after so much darkness!” Aye, he would be glad to do that. The darkness had endured too long. He was weary almost to death of it. He saw himself a sort of prisoner—self-immured in that chill gloom, and it was hateful to him. He looked back, and marvelled that he should have crouched there so many years manacled by useless sorrow and hatred and the thirst for revenge. He looked forward—that sweet and peaceful picture still in his mind, and the sunlight seemed warm and golden to

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him. He sat in it, and held a child upon his knee. His eyes stung with quick tears.

A sudden impatience stirred him to have done with the ugly past, to make the step from night to day—strike off those manacles too long worn. He wondered why he had refused and temporized while De Coucy was with him.

“There is no time so good as now.” True words! What might not happen before the morrow!

“No time so good as now.”

Pender lifted his head, and his sodden cheeks glowed with an instant's red color. His breath began to come fast. Why not now, then? A word, and the thing was done. The telephone instrument stood upon the table at his elbow. He made use of it to call the servants, to give orders, to transact most of his daily domestic business. He had but to lift the receiver from the hook. A voice would answer—the ancient butler's, probably. He would tell the man to find Miss Vittoria and send her to him. In five minutes the child would be in the room.

It was as easy as that.

He put out his hand toward the telephone instrument, but the hand trembled exceedingly, and he waited to steady it. He tried once more, and the hand would not stir. It was as if his brain had no control over it—as if the hand were possessed of an intelligence of its own, and resisted him. He tried again, and he was helpless. Something like anger burned in him, and a sudden sensation of vertigo

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flashed across his eyes. The rebellious hand raised itself from the polished mahogany—wavered in air—advanced an inch and retreated—fell to shaking as if in an ague. He found that he could no more touch that instrument of metal and rubber than he could have touched a blazing flame. It was impossible.

Again the wave of anger swept him, and was followed by sheer wonderment and something like panic. He thought he must be ill. Shall not a man's own limbs obey him?

There was yet another way—easier still. He could write. A half-dozen words scrawled upon paper were enough to set Vittoria free. With a sort of rush—a frenzy of haste—he caught up his pen and dipped it. Paper lay under his hand. . . .

After what may have been the space of ten minutes, or it may have been more, Pender Fleming sat back in his chair, and his head drooped heavily, so that the pallid jowls were spread out upon his breast.

It was too late. He could not do it. Gyves worn for twenty years were rusted home. He could not strike them off. He was appalled at the insignificance of his strength before the night of that passion which had swayed him for so long—a little child pushing against a stone wall—an insect at the foot of a mountain.

The truth was that there was no will to change left in him, and at last he knew it clearly. The will was atrophied. He was in the grip of a thing so much

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stronger than himself that he could not even stir it. He was helpless.

So he sat and looked the truth in the face, gravely, without resentment—acknowledging his master. He thought of the good thing he had wished to do, but it had already begun to pale before his eyes. He regretted it but mildly. He thought of that sweet and benign picture the Frenchman had painted for him, and it seemed to him that it would have been very pleasant—in some other world, very far away. But it was not for him. It was a sort of mirage. It dimmed away and was nothing. It had never been anything but a vision—colors thrown upon empty air.

Then abruptly there came before him, unsought, unlooked for, the face of Creighton Blake and the face of Richard, his son, and the face of Donna Bianca with anguished eyes. And at that he trembled a little and was still. There began slowly to mount along his veins, like the course of an insidious drug, the poison of the old bitter hatred—the salt, unslaked thirst for revenge. It rose about him like dark waters—like the resurgence of an inundating sea held off for a little while by flimsy dikes. It met over his head in silent waves; he drank of its bitterness, he breathed it into his lungs, it swept him away with an overwhelming, a resistless might.

There was a knocking at the study door. When it had been repeated twice Pender heard it, and said, "Come in!" The ancient butler handed him a sealed

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note sent, he said, by the hand of a groom from Cedar Hill. Pender Fleming glanced at the superscription, found it unfamiliar, and tore open the envelope. He looked to the bottom of the single sheet, saw the name there, and gave a smothered cry—afterward sat staring before him, the paper crumpled in one unsteady hand.

After a space the servant coughed, and said that the groom from Cedar Hill was waiting to take back an answer. Then his master roused himself and read the few brief sentences.

Creighton Blake begged Mr. Fleming to accord him a half-hour's interview upon a matter of great importance. He was staying, for a day or two, with friends at Cedar Hill.

Again the master of Standish fell into a fit of silent staring, but at its end looked up, and there was a strange light in his pale eyes before which the old servant found himself oddly uncomfortable. He said:

"Tell the messenger to say to this—gentleman that I shall be glad to receive him, *with his son*, to-morrow at three."

The ancient butler said, "Very good, sir!" and went out of the room, closing the door.

Behind him Pender Fleming broke into a fit of dreadful laughter.

XXIV

OUTSIDE THE STUDY DOOR

DURING that evening Richard Blake called Vittoria up by 'phone and told her that his father was at Cedar Hill, had communicated with Pender Fleming, and that the two of them were to come by appointment on the next afternoon to Standish. It was, of course, the first hint she had of the matter, and excited her hugely. She had put no belief at all in the possibility of her father's retreat. Despite Beau Temple's words, she had hardly given it a moment's thought, for it seemed to her quite incredibly inconsistent with Pender's character. She considered that she knew him too well for that. It would require, she said to herself, some gigantic force to move that strange being, and she could not see where the gigantic force was to come from. The old catch phrase came to her mind, and she smiled over it. When an irresistible force meets an immovable object, what will result? What, indeed? Pender Fleming seemed to her to be about as immovable as anything she knew of. What was the irresistible force? And even if it came, what then? The old catch question had never been solved.

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She thought of Beau Temple and the broken friendship, but shook her head. A permanent break there would hurt her father shrewdly, but would it move him? No, not twenty broken friendships—had he such. What was it, then, that had happened? Creighton Blake had asked for an interview, and Pender had consented to see him—together with his son! She could not understand it at all, and she began to grow uneasy. The acquiescence had been too ready. It was very unlike Pender—unless, perhaps, he had something up his sleeve. That would be like him—very like!

She was still standing near the telephone some ten minutes later when the bell rang again, and it was Beaumont Temple at Lone Tree Hill. He had to tell her of De Coucy's interview, which the blind Frenchman had faithfully reported to him upon arriving at home, and while he had, of course, to condense a good deal, he told her the gist of what had passed between the two men.

"I really think Pender is breaking up," Temple said. "It seems almost incredible, but I believe he's giving way. Have you seen him?"

She said no, but told of the meeting arranged for the morrow, and at that Temple gave an exclamation of surprise, and was silent for a little while. At last he said:

"Without in the least knowing why, I don't quite like it. To be sure it sounds like a definite surrender—kisses all round and general hilarity, but—I don't

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know. He's piling it on. It's a bit too thick. I should be better pleased with less apparent eagerness. I wonder if Pender's digging a mine of any sort."

"I don't quite like it either," said Vittoria. "I'm afraid, a little. I don't trust him. I wish you'd come to-morrow too, Beau. You needn't enter the house, you know."

"Oh, I mean to come," he said. "Didn't I tell you? He has sent for me. De Coucy and I are both to come—though no hour was set. That's what I was thinking about. Pender's piping all hands to quarters. Maybe it's surrender, and maybe it's fight. I wish I knew which. But I'm no prophet." He was once more silent for a space, while the girl waited, but said, finally:

"I think I'll just have out a nag and ride to Cedar Hill this evening. I should like to talk it over with the Blakes. And, in any event, I'll turn up at Standish to-morrow between two and three. I dare say we're both paying the old gentleman a dashed poor compliment, you know, in suspecting him. I dare say it's quite all right, and that he means to do the handsome thing to-morrow. Let's believe it, anyhow. We shall sleep the better. Good-night, child!"

Vittoria said:

"Good-night, Beau, dear. Yes, I dare say you're right." But she turned away from the telephone with an unsmiling face, and went soberly up-stairs to her own chamber. She was aware that she ought

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to be full of a hopeful and happy excitement, but she was not; she was full of foreboding.

What had that fateful morrow in store for her?

She got ready for bed, but, finding that sleep was out of the question, took up a book and read in it until her eyes were heavy with fatigue. Then at last she put out the lights, and lay down. It was just midnight. The wind was from the direction of the village, and she heard the faint sound of chimes, and then twelve thin, clear strokes. Afterward she heard the half hour and after that one o'clock. Then at last sleep came, and she dreamed a happy dream, and awoke in the golden morning refreshed.

Imaginative fears, heavy enough overnight, rarely can face the morning sun. They flee away with the shadows. Vittoria's fears fled before the light of that fresh and fragrant day. If they did not entirely vanish they retreated to a very polite distance, and sat down there quite quietly, making themselves as inconspicuous as they could. The girl's mind went back over what she called the accumulation of evidence, and, despite her natural distrust of all Pender Fleming's motives (alas, that such a distrust should have found place in her, but the man had put it there!), in spite of her knowledge of his unbending nature, she believed that at last her father was about to give way. What it was that had moved him she could not imagine—perhaps Beau Temple's wrath, perhaps the blind Frenchman's eloquence. In any case, he seemed to be about to do all that a man could

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do to repair ancient wrongs, and she was ashamed that she had distrusted him.

She threw a kiss to her beautiful mother, and went down to breakfast. After that she took a little walk with Mr. Hennessy, but returned presently to her walled garden, and sat there for the remainder of the morning, reading a parcel of new magazines which had just arrived, and devouring the small pink box of Russian chocolates which she had taken out there some days before and had then forgotten. A maid had rescued them and carried them back to the house, and they were very stale, but Vittoria had periods of being a thrifty young soul, and could not bear to throw away even stale chocolates so long as they were edible at all.

The hour between half-past twelve and half-past one she employed quite happily up in her room engaged in personal decoration—with ravishing results—lunched at the end of this time, and soon after two went out upon the deep side-veranda to await the first of the expected visitors.

The first proved to be Beaumont Temple and M. de Coucy, who drove over from Lone Tree Hill, arriving promptly at half-past two. Temple was flushed and eager—in prodigious spirits. The day would seem to have driven away his vapors of doubt as well as Vittoria's. He shook her hands for a long time and insisted upon kissing her on both cheeks.

"It may be my last chance," he said—but could

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not look sorrowful, though he tried. "In an hour's time I may have to fight Richard Blake for that privilege. Vittoria, my good woman, I believe we've pushed Pender—the old curmudgeon!—to the brink of the precipice. I believe he's going to make the jump. I was doubtful last night, but I feel cheerfuller to-day. I believe he means to give way."

"And I, too, mademoiselle," said the blind Frenchman. "I believe it also. I offer my felicitations in advance."

Vittoria began to try to say how grateful she was to him for what he had done, and Temple turned away to ring for a servant, saying over his shoulder that he would get a word with Pender before the Blakes should arrive. Old Griggs came at his ring, and Temple sent him to announce that he and M. de Coucy had called.

The man was gone some minutes, then returned a little flushed, and avoiding Beau Temple's eye. Mr. Griggs had so few demands made upon his diplomatic qualities that they had become, as it were, atrophied.

"Mr. Fleming is asleep, sir," he said, nervously, "and I daren't waken him before three o'clock—begging your pardon, sir. He hasn't been well, and he left strict orders, so the valet says, that he wasn't to be awakened until three. There's two gentlemen expected then—Mr. Blake and Mr. Richard Blake. If you could wait until three, sir? I'm very sorry—"

"Yes," said Beau Temple, slowly. "Yes, to be

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sure. Quite so. I'll wait. Thanks. That's all, Griggs." The butler slipped away with what sounded very like a sigh of relief, but Temple stood for some little time looking after him with a puzzled frown.

"Won't see us until after he's seen the Blakes!" he said to himself. "That's odd. . . . Why? . . . Has Pender something up his sleeve, after all? I wonder, now."

He turned back toward the others, and Vittoria asked him if he was going in at once to see her father. He said:

"No, not yet. Pender's having a nap, so Griggs tells me. We'll wait until the Blakes come."

So they sat down and talked together, and in ten or fifteen minutes the Blakes, father and son, arrived in a motor from Cedar Hill. Vittoria had thought it possible that Béatrix Faring might come with them, but she did not; the men were alone.

They came at once round the house to the open veranda, for they had seen the three people there, and Vittoria met them at the top of the low steps.

The younger Blake was not at all the sort of man to betray emotion in public. When he was at great heights or depths of feeling he merely looked grim—save that his eyes were eloquent to those who took the trouble to meet them. He looked grim as he came up the steps of the veranda at Standish, and his hand, when Vittoria's took it, was rather cold. She was aware that her own hand was trembling. Blake said, in a low tone:

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"At last, I think." And she answered:

"Yes, I think so, Richard. I think it's—all right at last." They stood looking at each other for a moment with a singular gravity—as well they might do, for the whole of their future lives hung in a balance. Then the young man said:

"May I present my father to you?" and gave way for Creighton Blake, who had been standing behind him.

The elder man bared his head and came a step forward. He made a very courtly and old-fashioned bow without offering his hand, but Vittoria put out her two hands to him and he took them. She said:

"I saw you once at a distance, sir—across a ball-room." And Creighton Blake said:

"I remember."

Rather oddly there flashed into the girl's mind that scene in the walled garden when her father had first caught sight of Richard Blake and had thought him a phantom of the past. She looked now upon this melancholy white-haired man, with his scored and furrowed face, and it seemed to her incredible that only twenty years past he had been enough like Richard to make possible such a mistake as that. But as she looked upon him longer she began to see that the features of father and son were in truth the same, the height alike, that they had the same trick of carrying their heads. She was appalled to see how grief could ravage and destroy. She turned her head for an instant, and saw that her lover had joined

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Beaumont Temple and M. de Coucy at the other end of the porch—out of earshot. Then she said:

"I sent you a message by Richard. Did he give it you?"

The white-haired man bent his head. "It was all that is kind—all that is sweet."

"I wanted you to know how I felt," said she. "I couldn't bear to have you think that when I found out I—blamed. I wanted you to know that I was glad—glad!"

Creighton Blake's worn face stirred a little. He looked down upon the girl with a sort of pathetic hunger, and she heard him say, under his breath:

"Bianca's child!" He said it two or three times. And afterward he said, aloud:

"You are so like her that it is a kind of miracle. I knew that when I saw you the first time across a ball-room. But you were a child then—unmoved, untouched at heart. Love has been at work since. Now—it is hard to believe that you are not Bianca."

He filled his lungs with a deep breath, and seemed to straighten his shoulders.

"I must let your—let Mr. Fleming know I am here. I must send in my name." He met the girl's eyes once more with a grave smile.

"Never fear!" said he. "We shall set you free here to-day. You and the boy shall be free to live out—what—couldn't be lived before. It's meant to be. I'm convinced of that. At first, when Richard first met you I was sorry—afraid. I tried to take

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him away with me. I foresaw all this opposition. I thought unhappiness would come of it—broken hearts—more tragedy upon the old tragedy. But it was meant to be. Neither Pender nor I could stop it—nothing! It had to be. Please God, it may end in joy and lifelong happiness. She'll—look down on it and see—and be glad, I think.”

He turned away before the girl could speak. Richard Blake came forward to meet him, and they went toward one of the three long windows which stood open into the house. At just that moment old Griggs appeared coming out, and spoke to Creighton Blake. Vittoria saw the man nod his head, and after a moment he followed the servant indoors.

Richard turned back to where she was, and said:

“Mr. Fleming wants to see my father alone for a few moments, and then wants me to join them. Shall I wait out here?”

“We might go inside,” said she, “and wait in the hall. Oh, Richard! Richard!” She had begun to be seized by spasms of shivering, as if she were cold, and she found that her breath came and went irregularly and fast. They walked together into the drawing-room upon which the veranda gave, and crossed it to the chief entrance-hall. There was a low stair-landing opposite the door, up only three or four steps, broad, with a row of six casemented windows, and a long, cushioned bench beneath them. The glass of the windows was colored, and had been brought by Pender Fleming's father from a disman-

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tled German chapel of the fifteenth century. It told the story of the Prodigal Son in six quaint and rather absurd panels.

"We'll wait on the stair-landing," Vittoria said, "and then you can go to my father immediately he sends word." She told the ancient Griggs, who was hovering near, where they would be, and they went up to the window embrasure. It faced the west, and the afternoon sun, filtering through the leaves of a beech outside, had begun to send slanting beams here and there through the pictured glass.

Vittoria stood still for a moment before seating herself, and the sunbeams fell across her head and breast and lay about her feet on the floor—billets and lozenges of *azure* and *gules* and *or*. The man's heart was wrung with an intolerable ache of love and sheer delight at her splendid beauty, standing so, bathed in jewelled light. It was more poignant than a sharp pain.

She turned her head, saw him staring at her strangely, and gave him a little smile.

"What is it, Richard? What are you thinking?"

"I was thinking," said he, "that you are so beautiful that I can hardly bear it. Does that sound like nonsense?—because it isn't."

"I don't care whether it's nonsense or not," she said. "I love it. If you didn't think I was—nice-looking I should drown myself. And I shall, too, if you ever get over thinking it. You told me that first evening at Catharine Dudley's dance that I was

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beautiful. I've never forgotten. I wondered if you'd ever say it again. And now you have.

"Oh!" she cried, "I can't talk about my — my looks! Richard, what are they saying behind that door down yonder? What are they saying about you and me? I'm deathly afraid. I'm cold with fear." She pressed closer to him, held him by the shoulders, hid her face upon his coat.

"It means so much—so much!" she said. "Richard, do you know, after the other night in the garden, I thought—there couldn't be anything more. I thought we'd reached the highest height in all the world. I was quite contented to go on living with just the memory of that. I had no hope—not the smallest hope of anything else. I was really happy. But now—" She tightened her hold upon him with a sudden strength.

"I can't lose you!" she cried. "I think I should die. He's got to set me free, Richard! I couldn't bear it. It would be—"

Her head went up swiftly, and for a single tense instant the two stared into each other's eyes.

"What was that?" she said, in a whisper. "I thought I heard—something. What was that sound?"

Richard Blake's head turned slowly until he faced the hall beneath.

"It might have been a book dropped on the floor," he said, but his face was white. He began to take the girl's hands down from his shoulders—free himself from her hold.

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"Perhaps I'd better go and see." Once more their eyes met, and Vittoria gave a low cry.

"Ah, go! go quickly!" she said. "It's the door at the end of the corridor. Please be quick!"

He ran down the steps without further speech, and the girl stood looking after him, her hands caught up over her mouth lest she break into a scream, the beams of sunlight slanting across her head and shoulders—billets and lozenges of *azure* and *gules* and *or*.

XXV

THE IRRESISTIBLE FORCE MEETS WITH THE IM- MOVABLE OBJECT

AND Pender Fleming sat in his dim room, where the sun never entered, and waited and waited for his great hour to come.

After so many years!

Perhaps he was quite mad at last. Perhaps he had been mad all that long time. Who shall say of a man that has dwelt for nearly twenty years in an air poisoned by hatred, malice, bitterness, despair—breathing that air into his lungs until all his blood is foul with it, until body and heart and soul reek with its poison—who shall say of such a man just where sanity ends and mania begins?

Perhaps it is kinder to believe that he was mad.

He never went to bed at all on the night after he had received Creighton Blake's note. He sat all night alone in his study. He ate no dinner, he read none of his heavy books. He sat and stared before him or hid his face, shivering, or broke into a long fit of that dreadful tittering laughter. But once—toward midnight—he unlocked and opened a certain drawer of the great table-desk, and took from it

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an object which he held for a long time in his hands, gloating over it, and at last hid among the littered papers before him.

Once or twice during the night his valet knocked at the door, a triple knock so that his master should know who it was, and once he heard Pender stirring about within, but there was no answer, and so the man went away. He was not greatly disturbed, for he had been in that house nearly ten years, and no eccentricity of the master of Standish could have surprised him very much.

He came again in the morning, and finally, between nine and ten, was admitted, and received orders for breakfast—which, by the way, he removed almost untasted. It has been said that the servant was in a measure surprise-proof, yet even he went away with round and frightened eyes. Something during that long night had ravaged Pender Fleming's physical being incredibly. He had become a sort of dreadful caricature of himself—the pallid face deep scored with haggard lines, the pendulous lip outhanging grotesquely. All the man's great burden of unwholesome flesh seemed to hang loose upon his bones, like an ill-fitting garment. He was somehow horrible to see.

Again at noon he ate nothing, but drank a stiff glass of brandy-and-water. He waited and waited for that great hour, and from time to time laid his hand upon the object hidden under the papers, as if to make sure it was still there, ready for use. But by this time

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the mental strain under which he was laboring, together with the lack of sleep and of food, had begun to tell upon him badly. His head was light and very feverish, with a singing in the ears—the brandy-and-water, after long abstinence from food, may have had something to do with that—and his eyes were playing grotesque tricks with him: he seemed to see through an orifice in a cloud of darkness. When he directed his gaze upon an object across the room he saw that object well enough, but his field of vision was a space no more than a yard square; everything beyond that, above it or below it or to either side, was first cloudy gray, confused in outline, then quite black. Also, if he looked steadily upon anything for more than a few seconds, it began to stir as if it were alive; sometimes it jumped up and down, sometimes turned gravely heels over head, sometimes performed a grotesque but interesting dance.

At first he was a little concerned about this—afraid that it might balk him in what he had to do, but the fear did not endure long. He was beyond trifles. His extraordinary state of mind and body—which was not altogether unlike a state of drunkenness—swept them grandly aside. His mind could hold but one thing just then: the splendor of that coming hour—that crowning deed!

After so many years!

At half-past two the telephone at his elbow rang three short calls, and he took down the receiver. It was the ancient Griggs, announcing Mr. Temple

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and "Mounceer dee Koosy." Pender had forgotten them both—forgotten that they were asked to call on this day. The interruption set him to storming in a childish and absurd rage. He cursed the astonished butler wickedly, then for a moment calmed himself, and told the lie about being asleep. But even after that was done, the servant gone with his message, Pender trembled and swore, sitting alone in his shadows—called Beau Temple and the Frenchman outrageous names—tramped up and down the room excitedly—was on the point of having the two gentlemen turned out of the house.

Indeed, into such a jangle of overstrained nerves had this trivial interruption thrown him that when, half an hour later, the telephone bell rang again, the man dropped forward against the edge of the big table with a cry that was almost a scream.

Griggs's voice said that Mr. Blake and Mr. Richard Blake had arrived, and Pender began to shiver very violently from head to foot, so that the receiver thumped against his ear and his teeth chattered. He made a tremendous effort, and controlled his voice.

"Show Mr. — Blake in. Tell Mr. Richard Blake to wait five minutes. In five minutes I will ring. Then—I want him."

His heart was beating in slow, enormous throbs, like a railway locomotive going up-hill. He thought he heard the sound of them—so like the sound of the coughing, gasping engine—and he felt with each throb

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a great surge of blood up into his head, which almost burst under the impact. The door opened, a name was murmured, and Creighton Blake entered the room. The door closed again behind him. He came a step forward, peering a little, for the window-blinds were drawn and the place in a half darkness.

With a scuffling sound Pender Fleming got to his feet behind the broad mahogany table, and stood there, bent forward, his hands upholding him. His face was ghastly, and he was shaking all over, like a man in a fit. Creighton Blake saw him, and came forward another step or two, saying:

"I am here."

"At last!" said Pender Fleming, with a sort of sob. "At last—after all these years in hell!" His tongue began to stammer thickly.

"A r-reckoning at last!" said he. "Now, y-you p-p-pay. First y-you, then your s-s-son—both Blakes together. Both Bl-lakes g-gone where I-I've been for t-t-twenty years. Then I can die in peace."

His wavering, groping fingers found the thing which had been hidden under the papers, and raised it a little way. He waited, one hand over his eyes, because the other man had suddenly begun to perform the most surprising feats. He had begun to jump from side to side with incredible agility, though neither his arms nor his legs seemed to stir. And wherever he jumped he left a sort of image of himself—a ghost, an eidolon—until there were, almost at once, a dozen Creighton Blakes in the room—tall, gaunt gentle-

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men with white hair and mustache, furrowed face, grave and courtly manner.

The visitor said:

"I have not come to offer you a reckoning. I offered that many years ago, and you refused it—though it is still yours, if you wish. I have come to make a plea for my son."

Pender Fleming gave a shout. He thought he knew now which of those crowded images was real. He raised the revolver quickly and fired. It was a small weapon of .32 calibre, but it made an appalling noise in that closed room—outside, through the thick panels, it seems to have sounded like a book dropped on the floor—and the place was instantly full of acrid, biting smoke.

Creighton Blake sprang forward with a cry, and as he came near, large and distinct and unmistakable now, the other man pulled the trigger of his pistol again, but the cartridge failed to explode; and, in an instant, the weapon was struck from his hand and fell some distance away upon the floor. It was a brief, inglorious, pitifully unequal struggle. Pender Fleming had the sensation of being hurled violently from a great way off, backward, until he fell, half fainting, into the chair where he had sat, his head hanging over the chair's back, his legs and arms asprawl.

Blake stood above him, white-faced, with fierce eyes.

"*Murder!*" he cried. "*You'd murder me?*" He

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seemed to feel, for the moment, nothing but sheer astonishment and anger. He was so angry that he was trembling a little with it, and two spots of red came out suddenly in his pale cheeks.

"You'd trap me in here and murder me, would you? First me, and then Richard. Good God! Are you as vile as that?" He made a step forward with clinched hands, and Pender Fleming seemed to try to flatten his gross, sprawling body still farther back in the arm-chair. The whites of his eyes showed all round, and his lips curled hideously back from his teeth in a violent, grinning snarl of hate and fear. He looked like a cornered animal whose strength is gone, so that it can fight no longer, only grin and snarl and wait for death.

The white-haired man gazed down upon him as upon something loathsome.

"What a vile and a contemptible coward!" said he. "What an abominable monster!" He thought he heard a sound behind him and turned swiftly to see, but there was no one. What he had heard was the door of the room opening a few inches, and closing again, for Richard Blake to look in. He went a step toward the other side of the room, peering through the shadows, but all was still there again, and so he turned back. He picked up the fallen pistol and slipped it into his pocket, then moved once more close to the big table, and gazed down upon the man who sat behind it.

"A coward!" he said, reflectively. "Yes, you have

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been a coward from the very first—from the beginning. It is only cowards who are brutal enough and malicious enough to inflict upon a woman such cruelties as—she suffered from you—you beast! You filthy beast! It's only cowards who do what you did. They do it because they are weak and contemptible. Brutality is their only strength.

“And then,” said Creighton Blake—“then when she could bear no more, when I had taken her away from you, and was trying to give her a little poor happiness, did you follow, as a man would have done—face me—make me answer for robbing you? Not you! Not you! You hid yourself here in your house, and feared and hated and cursed. You were afraid! And after that—when she—had died, and I returned and wrote to you to say that I was ready now to answer for what I had done—ready to give you such satisfaction as a man may offer—the risk of his life, before you—what then? You were afraid! You never even answered my letter. I wrote again, and still you hid yourself, and hated and hated, and were afraid.

“Your child grew up to be a girl and a young woman. Did you play a father's part to that motherless girl—take her out into the world—try to make her life a happy life? Not you, again! You hid yourself still. You were afraid the world would remember. You had a coward's miserable pride. You remained here, crouching in the dark like a horrible gigantic spider, and secreted hatred and malice and fear—always fear.

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"So we come to the end. Your daughter and my son love each other. Ah! there was a bitter blow to you, eh, my poisonous friend? You lie to the child, extort a promise from her; and then, to make more certain, you'd murder me and my son. What hells are there, Fleming, black enough, foul enough, for such as you? I wonder." He made a restless, nervous movement, as if his anger were hard to endure with calmness.

"I came here to make a plea," he said. "I came here to beg you to forget what has been, and to let these young people, who have been innocent of harm toward you, have their happiness. A plea!" The man's voice rose contemptuously.

"A plea to such as you! I could laugh at myself for a fool."

With an abrupt movement he pushed several loose sheets of paper across toward the silent man, who lay back in his chair, and seemed scarcely to breathe—looked like one dead in utter terror.

"Write!" said Creighton Blake, in his sharp, contemptuous tone. "Write, giving your daughter back her promise. There's ink before you, and paper. Be quick!"

Pender Fleming drew a hoarse breath, and his lips twisted, drew back once more into that silent, grinning snarl which made him look so like a cornered animal. But he did not move.

"Then I'll make you," said the other man, briefly, and drew the revolver from his coat-pocket. At

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sight of it Pender Fleming uttered a thin cry. Blake opened the weapon and spun the cylinder under his thumb. There was one spent cartridge and one which had failed to explode. The other three were untouched. He snapped the breech to, and folded his arms, holding the revolver in his right hand.

"You will write," said he, in a brisk tone, with no anger in it, no threat. "You will write, or this is the end of you. You have done nothing but ill in your life, Pender. You have harmed all who have come near you all your life long. You are like a poisonous reptile, and poisonous reptiles should be destroyed without hesitation. Once before I have rescued a victim of yours, and, thank God! she lived to know a little brief happiness after she had come out from under your shadow. Now I am going to rescue another. Oh yes, I know the promise was to extend beyond your life—to the length of the girl's own. But she is young, my friend. And she is very much in love. Words aren't worth much when love comes. With you gone, she'll find a way. Write what I tell you, or this is the end of all things for you. . . . And I shall not regret ridding the earth of such a thing. I shall be proud of it. My own life is spent. I shall follow you, conscious of having done a good act."

He took out his watch, looked at it, and laid it upon the table before him. He said:

"I'll give you two minutes," and folded his arms once more.

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One wonders how far the man was sincere—how far he would have gone toward carrying out his threat.

But Pender Fleming lay back in his arm-chair incapable of movement. He was cold, physically cold to the very marrow, and shivered with it, and he was afraid with a fear more bitter, more chill, more paralyzing, than he had thought could exist in the world of men.

By what sorcery had Creighton Blake penetrated to the nethermost depths of his soul and recognized what lay crouching there? For Blake had spoken the truth. He was a coward. He had always been a coward, and he had always known it, though, like many another before him, he had covered it with a cloak of sternness, of repellant silence, of tyranny, of brutal harshness. All his life he had been in secret afraid of little things and big. As a boy he had been afraid of the other boys—afraid of horses, of high places, of the water, of traffic in the streets. And he had tried to hide it with bluster and the affectation of love of solitude. As a man he had been afraid of innumerable things, and had lied and pretended and dissembled to conceal it. He had been secretly afraid of his wife until he found that she was afraid of him. Then he had ill-treated her incredibly. When she had fled he had been afraid of the world's laughter—scorn—the pointing finger, and so had hidden himself behind a mask of solitude and of grief that was—to do him justice—by no means unreal.

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But most of all things or beings in this world he had been afraid of Creighton Blake, and so had hated him most, and now the man knew it and had come to mock him. Creighton Blake, strong, fearless, a terrible figure, stood over him, searching his craven soul, and saw it as if the daylight struck in there, and knew that he was master.

From all the others he had hidden what shivered there within him—from Bianca, from Bianca's daughter, from Beaumont Temple. The mask had been a good mask—had served him well. But Creighton Blake saw beneath it as if it were not there: saw and knew and was scornful. Only cowards who have well hidden their cowardice under a mask of pride can realize the intolerable bitterness of the man's abasement, now that his garments were stripped from him and he lay naked. He writhed with it as with a physical agony. It seared him like a devouring flame. It was shame more poignantly terrible than any words can give even a dim image of. And Creighton Blake stood by and watched!

What was that question Vittoria had put to herself? "When an irresistible force meets with an immovable object, what will the result be?" The old catch question. Vittoria had wondered, but her father knew now. He knew where the flaw was in that question. For there exists no immovable object in this universe. Creighton Blake's will and his fear of it were the irresistible force. He himself had passed for the immovable object, but he was not—he

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was a lie, a cheat, a sham. He was afraid to the bottom of his soul.

He looked with despairing eyes at that still man before him. The eyes fell upon the little, bright, deadly thing in the man's hand, and he gave a violent shiver.

"Death?" He looked into the face of death and his mouth was dry and his bones turned to water. Fear ran icy fingers up and down his back. What though life meant suffering and loneliness and shame and dishonor, he clung to it with desperate hands. He could not die. He was afraid to.

"One minute and a half," said Creighton Blake. "You have thirty seconds left of this life of yours." He unfolded his arms.

Like a manikin pulled by wires Pender Fleming's body jerked forward suddenly over the broad table. His face lay among the papers, his hands clawed there feebly. He thought he screamed, but his lips made only whispering noises.

"I will do it!" he cried, in those desperate whispers. "I will do it! For God's sake, don't—kill me! Let me live! I will do it." He pushed himself up to a sitting posture. His hands scrambled among the things before him.

Creighton Blake inked a pen and held it out. He said:

"Write what I tell you!" And the other whispered:

"Yes! Yes!"

"Write, 'I was wrong.'"

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With an incredible effort Pender Fleming wrote the words.

““I release my daughter from her promise to me. I give my free consent to her marriage with Richard Blake. I wish her happiness.””

The pen traced the words very slowly, with infinite labor. It was like a child writing. The man's head hung forward almost upon the table before him—his mouth open and awry.

“Sign it!”

The signature was scrawled at the bottom, still with slow pains, and the pen rolled away from the slackened hand.

Creighton Blake drew a deep breath. He took the paper, blotted it carefully, and put it in his pocket. He made as if to lay the pistol down, but glanced at the man bowed before him, and slipped that into his pocket, also. Then he turned to go, but half-way across the room came back.

“I shall put the proper sort of face upon this,” said he. “Your daughter shall never know her release did not come from you willingly. But as a safeguard I shall tell my son the truth—no one else. If I know you, and I think I do, Pender—I think I know you well—you will be silent also—for your pride's sake. You'll never let it be known that you gave way because you were afraid. So far as I am concerned, you can go on safely, hiding yourself—playing out your farce to the end of your life. I won't give you away.”

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He looked once more upon that bowed silent figure, and then turned and left the room, closing the door after him.

So Pender Fleming was left alone in his darkened room, seated there where he had sat so many years. He had paid the price in shame and in mean humiliation, but he was alive. Stripped of honor and of pride—naked in his abasement—still he lived, and probably would go on living for years to come, for he was not a very old man. He looked starkly into those future years, and they were cold and gray and lonely. He knew that after the first writhings of anguish were over he would gather together a few miserable shreds of what had been pride, and, huddling them about him, would go on, more or less as he had always gone—aping, pretending, hiding what must be hidden, until the last day of all. It was a dreary prospect and he took small pleasure in it, but he was alive. He hugged that thought to him—warmed it in his bosom. All else was gone from him, but he was still alive.

It is perhaps the measure of his measureless fall that he fell to gloating over that.

XXVI

ALL'S WELL AT LAST

WHEN Creighton Blake went out from Pender Fleming's study and closed the door he found his son waiting for him near the stair-landing in the hall. The younger man was a little pale, and his face had its hard, grim look. He met his father with a low-voiced exclamation, and looked at him anxiously.

"You're not hurt, then?" he demanded. And Creighton Blake said:

"No. You heard that shot?"

"Vittoria and I both heard it—heard a noise, at least. We were here waiting. I went to the door and opened it a few inches and looked in. The place was full of powder-smoke, so I knew at once what had happened, but I saw you standing up and talking to Fleming, so I knew there'd been no great harm done. I told Vittoria that it must have been a heavy book dropped on the floor. It sounded rather like that."

"Where is she—Vittoria?" asked the elder man, and his son said:

"Out on the porch with the others." He drew a

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sigh which seemed to express deep dejection and some bitterness.

"So the man was shamming, after all! And it's to do all over again. I wish he'd shot at me. I should have killed him, I think."

"You wouldn't have had to," said Creighton Blake. "I didn't. The man's a coward. I only threatened him. Gad, what a miserable coward! It was rather horrible to see. Well, I got it, anyhow."

Richard Blake began to tremble. He caught his father's arm, staring into the elder man's face.

"What d'you mean? Got what? You don't mean to say—"

"Oh yes, I do!" said Creighton Blake, laughing excitedly. "That's just what I do mean to say. I blackguarded him for a bit, and threatened him, and he gave in."

The younger man leaned against the stair-railing and covered his face with his hands. But his father clapped him upon the back, crying:

"Come, come, lad! Buck up! It's all right. We've won. Come out and tell the girl. Don't stand there like a graven image!" He slipped an arm about his son's shoulders, and drew him along toward the door of that room which gave upon the side-veranda.

"I got it in writing," said he. "I was taking no risks. I got it down in black and white *with* signature, and Fleming won't go back on it for his miserable pride's sake." He slipped his free hand into a

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pocket and withdrew the folded paper. He gave it to Richard Blake.

"Take it out and give it to her for a betrothal present. It will be welcome, I think." But when the younger man had read the few words he thrust it back again into his father's hand.

"Give it to her yourself!" said he. "You got it—God knows how! It's yours to give. She'll like to have it come from you." He drew a great breath of relief and relaxation and joy.

"I've had a bad quarter of an hour," he confessed, "since I looked in through that door."

They went through the drawing-room, and, at the open French windows which gave upon the porch, the younger man fell behind so that his father might be first. Creighton Blake emerged, holding the paper in his hand. He said:

"Where's my future daughter-in-law?" And Vittoria ran to him with a cry. The man held up his paper before her eyes, saying:

"Read that, young woman! Read it!" She read it and gave a small shriek of delight, clapping her hands together like a child. Behind her Beau Temple said:

"By Jove, he's done it! Hurrah for Old Pender! I didn't know he had it in him. Good old Pender!" Vittoria turned and threw her arms about his neck. For the second time that day the man got more than his strict rights. He beamed down upon the head that was burrowing into his coat, and the others, standing about them, laughed.

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"Here! here!" Beau Temple said. "Stop that! Do you want to get me knifed in the back some dark night? Your young man has a red gleam in his eye already. Get away from me. My life's in danger!" The girl patted his cheeks with her two hands, called him a darling—whereat Beau Temple said: "Pooh! Pooh!"—and stood away from him.

"I must go to my father!" she cried. "He's all alone in there. I want to thank him for being a dear." She turned toward the open window, but Creighton Blake was before her.

"I—ah, I wouldn't go in just now, I think," said he. "Perhaps a bit later. I think your father would rather be alone for a while. You see—he's a little upset—a little nervous. We've been talking about things—"

She said, "Oh!" soberly, and looked for a moment into the man's eyes. It struck her all at once that Creighton Blake's manner and bearing had altered greatly in that short time within the house. He had gone in bowed, grief-ridden, hesitant: had emerged with erect head and flushed cheeks, with a war-like gleam under his gray brows. She said, "Oh!" again, and it may be that she understood a little—knew that something had occurred behind that closed door which it would be best to know no more of. So she turned away, and found her lover beside her, silent, with glowing eyes. Apropos of nothing in particular, she began to blush all over, and was

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aware that her heart beat very fast. She looked over her shoulder with a little quick laugh.

"There's such a lot of people here!" she said. "Come down into my garden with me!"

Beaumont Temple watched the two go down across the lawn until they were out of sight, and he nodded his head.

"All's well at last!" said he. "'God's in His heaven,'" and turned his eyes to Creighton Blake.

"Pender has surprised me. I was a little afraid. I distrusted him. I must shake his hand for this."

The other man looked a bit uncomfortable. He said:

"Perhaps—of course I can't say much, but—perhaps I ought to tell you that—well, he wasn't quite prepared to do it, you know—not quite prepared. It took some urging." And at that Beau Temple nodded, for he had found out what he wanted to know. He, as well as Vittoria, had noted that erect head and martial bearing—had had his suspicions.

"Well, it's done, anyhow," said he. And Creighton Blake said:

"Yes, it's done." The eyes of the two men met and held.

"So there remains," said Temple, "only to get the youngsters married—and as soon as possible. This is June, the month of brides. Prod your son into insisting upon an immediate marriage. I dare say he won't need prodding, though. Vittoria will hold up her hands in horror, of course—protest—

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argue. Secretly she'll be delighted, for she's very dull here. And Pender—"

"Ah!" said the other man, softly, and the eyes of the two still held with a certain significance.

"You're wise," Creighton Blake said. "Very wise. I'm altogether with you. We must speak for an early marriage — insist upon it. One never knows—"

"And meanwhile," said the younger man—"meanwhile, perhaps the child might spend a few days with Mrs. Faring—a woman's essential at these times. Doubtless the two of them will be going up to town for clothes—all the mysterious things brides have to be provided with. Then a quiet wedding, eh?"

Creighton Blake nodded his head without relaxing his alert gaze. He had the air to be following something obscure in the other man's mind—something beneath the spoken words. He said:

"I'll speak to Mrs. Faring. It shall be done, you may be sure. Perhaps we could even take my future daughter-in-law back to Cedar Hill in the motor-car with us, and keep her there."

"That would be a very good plan, indeed," said Beaumont Temple, gravely. "Pender will understand, I am sure, that the child wants a woman's aid and counsel just now—if it's put to him with care." And, for just an instant, Mr. Blake's face wore a little grim smile, while he said:

"I'll put it. Trust me! And I'll keep her under my eye."

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A gardener's boy was passing the veranda, and Temple asked him to send his trap around.

"I must be off," he said. "Perhaps we'll drive over to Cedar Hill this evening, De Coucy and I, for a general jollification. Tell Mrs. Faring to expect us." The two men shook hands very heartily, with mutual respect and liking. They had not said very much, but they understood each other perfectly, and they had managed to construct between them, in a singularly brief time, a very workman-like conspiracy for the care and safety of Vittoria Fleming. So Temple turned away, found Raoul de Coucy at the other end of the porch, where he had withdrawn, and with an arm flung across the blind man's shoulders, went down the steps and round the house toward the drive where his trap was waiting.

Half-way he halted for a moment, and De Coucy asked, "Why do we stop?"

"I see two young people down in the gardens beside the goldfish-pool," Beau Temple said. "They look very happy. They don't know they are being watched, but they wouldn't care if they did know it. One of them has her head on the other's shoulder. Ah! now they're walking on, down under the arbor. They're going to the walled garden. Nobody can see them there."

The Frenchman drew a little sigh.

"Ah, si jeunesse savait!"

"If it knew what?" demanded Beaumont Temple.

"What it costs," said Raoul de Coucy. "If youth

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knew what it costs! I was thinking of how much pain there has gone into the making of that happiness down yonder."

A brave and gallant gentleman squared his shoulders and reared his head.

"It's worth it," said he.

THE END

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